


2016

# School Community Members' Perceptions Regarding LGBT-based Bullying, Harassment, and Violence

Steven W. Street  
*Walden University*

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Steven Street

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2016

Abstract

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Harassment, and Violence

by

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MEd, Middle Tennessee State University, 2007

BS, Middle Tennessee State University, 1991

BBA, Middle Tennessee State University, 1987

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Walden University

July 2016

## Abstract

In Tennessee, a majority of students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender (LGBT) do not feel safe due to bullying and harassment that is targeted toward them by their peers. Schools, such as MTS school (a pseudonym), are not required to specify protection for LGBT students, causing the LGBT bullying to continue without being reported and resulting in higher absences, lower achievement, greater mental health issues, and in some cases, suicidal ideation among LGBT students. Through confidential personal interviews that were transcribed and coded, this case study's purpose was to better understand how MTS adult stakeholders perceive (a) the issue of LGBT based violence, (b) the effectiveness of the school's current bullying policy in protecting LGBT students, and (c) the possibility of implementing a change in the school policy to protect LGBT students. Exploring the barriers to protecting LGBT students was based on the theoretical framework of antibias education in which students gain self-awareness, develop acceptance of human diversity, recognize unfairness in society, and are empowered to act against discrimination. The following four themes emerged: (a) accepting culture, (b) protection of students, (c) need for change, and (d) process for change. These findings have led to the development of a policy recommendation and plan of action that, through antibias education, will specifically protect the LGBT students and include acceptance and tolerance of the LGBT community in the counseling curriculum. The results of this study may create a positive social change by opening up dialogue concerning the effects of LGBT-based bullying on students and exploring opportunities to create a safe school environment for all children.

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## Dedication

This study is dedicated to every child who is discovering who they are and is afraid to show it. To those who feel they can't live their lives truthfully without being persecuted. To those who feel they have no one to talk to for fear of being rejected, bullied, or physically attacked. You are not alone.

## Acknowledgments

Although, I've been teased about being a "career student" all my life, this is a goal that always seemed like an unobtainable dream. Of course, I owe undying gratitude to my mother, Christine, who has been a source of support and encouragement throughout my life and especially in obtaining my two bachelor's degrees and the master's degree. It was during this doctoral process that I came out to her, and her response was nothing less than unconditional love and support.

I also need to express undying love and gratitude to my daughter, Riley, for understanding the times I couldn't give her my full attention or do things with her because I was working on this degree. She has been supportive and proud of me during this journey, and that means more than I can say.

Finally, I need to express great appreciation to those friends and colleagues who have been so excited for me and so encouraging to me throughout this process. There are times I believe I would have quit if it hadn't been for your love and support.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **Introduction**

This case study addressed Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT)-based bullying, harassment, and violence, which is a national problem that is also of concern in the state of Tennessee, where the local community under study is located. Though there are bullying policies currently in schools, only applying the term “bullying” minimizes the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender (LGBT) children and youth. According to Mayo (2014), “Bullying as a term does not capture the institutional scope of exclusion that LGBT and other minority youth experience...nor does [it] necessarily encourage school personnel to think broadly about exclusionary and hostile experiences students face” (p. 57). In this study I investigated how adult members of a rural elementary school community in middle Tennessee perceive issues of LGBT-based bullying, harassment, and violence to gain a better understanding of the barriers that keep LGBT students from feeling safe in this school, which could translate to what is happening in schools across the state of Tennessee. In order to contextualize this study, I will first address the issue from a statewide perspective and then offer a description of the problem at the elementary school where the study will take place.

### **Definition of the Problem**

Nationally, 89% of self-identified LGBT students are bullied at school in relation to their sexual orientation, whereas in Tennessee, 98% of those students experience being bullied at school according to the 2011 National School Climate Survey of the Gay,

Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2011). Over 60% of those bullied did not report the incidents, and the primary reason was that almost 37% of the students who did report such incidents said that school staff did nothing in response (GLSEN, 2011).

A major role for public schools is to provide a safe environment for the children who attend them. The recent focus on antibullying campaigns throughout the state of Tennessee evidence the importance of a safe environment. However, the LGBT population lacks legislative protection from bullying in Tennessee, and this lack of protection carries over to Tennessee's public schools. In recent years, Tennessee legislators have attempted to specifically exclude the LGBT population from protection against bullying. In 2013, the last of several attempts to pass a "Don't Say Gay Bill" into law failed. The proposed bill prohibits any classroom instruction or reading materials in the classroom that are inconsistent with "natural human reproduction" and it states that counselors, school nurses, and administration must notify parents of any discussions they have with their child in regard to sexuality (TN SB234, 2013). Such legislation would result in LGBT students having no one at school to talk to openly about their sexuality without fear of having their parents find out. This can increase homelessness due to the fact that 40% of homeless teens who identify as LGBT have been thrown out of their parents' homes (Williams Institute, UCLA website, 2012). Rejection by parents is a powerful stressor for LGBT youth in that those who experience this type of rejection are at a higher risk of attempting suicide (Haas, Eliason, Mays, Mathy, Cochran, D'Augelli, & Clayton, 2011). The last attempt to pass the "Don't Say Gay Bill" failed in March of 2013.

The current controversy in the Tennessee Legislature is a bill that has been introduced to keep the state from identifying specific protected groups from bullying in schools. Initially, Tennessee House Bill 927 was introduced in January, 2013 and defined bullying as “any written, verbal, or physical conduct that substantially interferes with a student’s educational benefits, opportunities, or performance...” (HB 927). The bill also specifies categories of students who would be protected from such bullying. These categories include students being bullied in relation to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (HB 927).

However, in response, State Representative White introduced an alternative bill that leaves it up to each school to determine what constitutes bullying as well as which populations are protected. Not including LGBT as a protected population could result in individual districts and schools allowing bullying targeted at these particular students.

Although they did not pass, these alternative bills, coupled with the lack of action by school officials in response to reports of LGBT bullying, it is logical that LGBT students in Tennessee would not feel safe in the public school environment. This is important in the local area of this qualitative study because at MTS School, teachers, staff, and parents have witnessed children as young as Kindergarten age who are transgender, and others who feel as though they should have been born the opposite sex. There have also been instances of students who do not exhibit heteronormative behavior. There is no attempt at this school to specifically protect LGBT students from anti-LGBT bullying, nor is there any curriculum used to educate students about the LGBT community.

Therefore the purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the barriers that keep LGBT students from feeling safe in this school. According to GLSEN (2011), 64% of LGBT students, nationwide, felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 30% reported having skipped at least one class and 32% reported having missed an entire day of school in the month prior to the survey because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. Mustanski and Liu (2013) studied 248 LGBT youth, of whom 62% self-identified as gay/lesbian, 28% identified as bisexual, and 10% identified as questioning, queer, or unsure. The study reported prospective predictors of suicide attempts among LGBT youth by surveying the participants. The predictors included previous suicide attempts, impulsivity, hopelessness, family support, peer support, conduct disorder (CD), major depressive disorder (MDD), age of same-sex attraction, and LGBT victimization. The data were examined using correlational analyses, and risk factors that were found to positively correlate with lifetime suicide attempts were MDD, CD, impulsivity, and hopelessness. Their findings showed a “need to focus prevention and support efforts on youth who experience an early age of same-sex attraction, as they appear to be at greater risk for suicidality (p. 446). Thus, it is crucial that prevention and support be available to students in elementary, middle, and high school.

This study took place at MTS Elementary School (a pseudonym), where I am currently employed as a teacher. MTS is a Title I elementary school, located near a major metropolitan city, yet in a suburban, outlying town with a population of approximately 42,000. MTS is a K-5 school with approximately 1,000 students currently enrolled. Around 30% of the students are categorized as minority. There are 71 teachers,

two school counselors, and two administrators. In 2012, MTS adopted a zero tolerance, antibullying policy which defined bullying as “any look, word, or action that makes someone feel angry, sad, or scared” (MTS, 2012). The first occurrence results in a note home to the parents of the students, a second offense results in a note to the parents and an email to an administrator, and a third offense results in an immediate office referral. There is no language in the antibullying policy that specifically defends students from harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation.

### **Rationale**

Statistics that show such a large number of self-identified LGBT students are bullied are unacceptable to me as a teacher and as a parent. I selected the problem of bullying LGBT students because two teen suicides in Middle Tennessee counties were given state-wide attention recently after both teens had complained of being bullied in relation to their sexual orientation (WSMV.com, 2012). Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, and Koenig (2011) stated that “LGBTQ youth report greater victimization, distress, and poorer academic performance than heterosexual youth” (p. 598). According to Center for Disease Control (n.d.), lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth were more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide as their heterosexual peers.

This issue is of concern before children reach their teen years. Throughout their educational experience, from first grade through twelfth, children are continually discovering themselves and who they are (Connolly, 2012). LGBT children’s inability to conform to the heteronormative environment accounts for a large part of the mistreatment and violence they experience before the age of 12 (Roberts, Austin, Corliss,

Vandermorris, & Koenen, 2010). According to Swearer, Turner, Givens, and Pollack (2008) students who do not meet traditional gender norms need a supportive climate starting in elementary school. At MTS, I have observed students using words such as *Gay*, and *Lesbian* to intimidate and humiliate other students. It is clear that these children's perceptions of LGBT people are negative and there is a level of intolerance instilled in them from either their families or society. On the faculty level, discipline for such offenses is implemented in the same manner as any other name calling. R. Jones, a faculty member on the behavior committee at MTS, stated that there is nothing in the antibullying policy specifically protecting students from harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation, thus it is left up to the individual teacher to categorize any reported bullying and deal with it as they see fit (personal communication, May 29, 2014). There is no attempt to teach tolerance of the LGBT community at MTS.

According to J. Thompson, a counselor at MTS, tolerance and acceptance are taught in guidance classes, however the topic of LGBT tolerance and acceptance is not included in the discussion because of possible backlash from parents (personal communication, May 28, 2014). Teachers' own beliefs and biases are relied upon to deter or allow harassment and bullying of LGBT students. According to M. Gardner, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at MTS, she is not comfortable addressing LGBT tolerance with the students in her classroom for fear of reactions by parents, fellow teachers, and possibly administration. She relates LGBT tolerance to religious beliefs and can be reprimanded for promoting a certain religious belief (personal communication, May 28, 2014). J. Simpson, a fellow teacher at MTS worries that being vocally supportive of LGBT issues will "out" him and possibly



cost him his job, or at least ostracize him from his colleagues. In fact, he has witnessed instances of faculty members laughing and making fun of an openly gay educational assistant behind his back and questioning whether other faculty members might be gay, using disapproving tones and negative stereotypical gestures (personal communication, May 29, 2014). These examples taken from MTS provide some context that supports the need for a better understanding of the culture of public schools, which influences their policies and procedures. When schools operate on the assumption that everyone should be heterosexual, inequitable practices result (Vega, Crawford, & Van Pelt, 2012).

Exploring the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators in regards to LGBT students and the bullying that is being perpetrated against them can help district and state leaders understand the importance of creating policies that will protect this group of students. The purpose of this study is to better understand the perceptions of the adult members of the MTS Elementary School community in regards to LGBT students and the bullying that they experience.

### **Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature**

Bullying is a serious problem in U.S. schools that affects one in five students (Ttofi & Farrington, 2012). Using data from the *Growing Up Today Study* of over 16,000 children of women who participated in the Nurses' Health Study II in 2007, Roberts et al. (2010) looked at "behaviors during childhood up to age 11 years, regarding media characters imitated or admired, roles taken in pretend play, favorite toys and games, and feelings of femininity or masculinity" (p 411) to determine if childhood abuse and PTSD were more prevalent among children who did not conform to traditional

gender roles. As a result of their analysis, they found LGBT students are twice as likely to experience violence as are their heterosexual peers (Roberts et al., 2010). Poteat et al. (2011) analyzed data from the 2009 Dane County Youth Assessment in Wisconsin. In the assessment, 17,366 middle and high school students represented all but two of the public schools in the district. The researchers assessed how frequently students experienced homophobic victimization within the past 12 months due to being perceived as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The researchers concluded that LGBT youth experience 30% higher rates of victimization, 11% higher rates of absenteeism, and 12% higher rates of substandard academic performance than heterosexual youth (Poteat et al., 2011). As part of a longitudinal study of male students of a private, college preparatory school in an urban Midwestern city, Swearer, Turner, Givens, and Pollack (2008) surveyed 251 students in grades 9 through 11 regarding incidents of being bullied. The researchers concluded, "Boys who are bullied by being called gay experience greater verbal and physical bullying than boys who are bullied for other reasons" (p.170). LGBT based verbal bullying was experienced 47% more, name calling was experienced 54% more, and physical attacks were 11% higher (p.169). Birkett, Espelage, and Koenig (2009) agreed that LGBT students not only frequently experience homophobic harassment by their peers, but also on occasion by school staff.

Kopels and Pacely (2012), stated that LGBT youths are more at risk of bullying than their non- LGBT peers. Robinson and Espelage (2012) surveyed over 11,000 middle and high school students in the Midwest United States on a range of topics, including but

not limited to sexual identity, suicide, bullying and victimization. The participants were given the option to identify as LGBT and were allowed to choose more than one option if so desired. Participants indicated whether they had experienced peer victimization in any form. They also indicated if they had seriously thought about killing themselves in the past month, if they had attempted suicide in the past year, as well as how many days of school they skipped. The researchers demonstrated that students who identify themselves as LGBT reported 3.3 times higher frequency of suicidal thoughts, 3.8 times higher rate of attempted suicide, and 79% higher unexcused absences from school than did their heterosexual demographically similar peers.

There is a range of severity of effects that bullying has, not only on the victims, but on the bullies and on those who witness the bullying behavior. Bullying has serious effects on the victims including personal suffering, self-reported anxiety, depression, and negative thoughts about themselves (Hunt, Peters, & Rapee, 2012; Osvaldsson, 2011). LGBT children are at a greater risk of experiencing rejection, victimization, and having poorer health, both physical and mental, than their heterosexual counterparts (Roberts et al., 2010) as well as greater academic concerns (Poteat et al., 2011; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010) because feeling inferior to others affects a child's motivation to do well in school (Connolly, 2012). The most common emotional response of victims is anger (Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra, & Vega, 2009). Students who have multiple roles in bullying, having been a victim, witness, and/or bully have

more often had thoughts of suicide than those who are victims only (Rivers & Noret, 2010).

Being a witness to bullying can have serious effects as well. Rivers, Noret, Poteat, and Ashurst (2009) examined perpetration of bullying behavior in over 2,000 students, ranging from 12 to 16 years old, who were attending public schools in Northern England. The students were able to indicate whether they had experienced bullying, perpetrated bullying behavior, or witnessed bullying behavior, which included an extensive list of items such as name calling, physical abuse, rumors spread, being ignored, intimidation, being robbed, being physically threatened, having homework destroyed, graffiti written, or pressure to take drugs or drink alcohol. The researchers found that bullying was part of the daily lives of the majority of the participants and that “observing victimization can negatively impact psychological functioning even in cases where students themselves have not been victimized” (p.218). In today’s society, cyber bullying has become a popular method of bullying among teenage youth; however, the effect on the bullying victims is more a result of the nature of the incident rather than its method of delivery (Bauman & Newman, 2013).

Prevention of bullying can be multifaceted, and include parental involvement as well as school-based programs. Parents can add to or help prevent the bullying behavior as well as aid in the severity of the reaction of the victims. Steinfeldt, Vaughan, LaFollette, and Steinfeldt (2012) studied 206 high school football players between the ages of 14 and 18 years who attended one of three high schools in the Midwestern United

States to investigate their bullying beliefs and behaviors. The participants were presented with four bullying scenarios that a high school student might encounter and asked how appropriate they deemed the behavior to be, if they would engage in such behavior, and if they ever had engaged in such behavior. The researchers found that a major predictor of bullying behavior was the students' perception of whether their parents would approve of their behavior, especially between boys and their fathers, as well as if their friends were engaging in the behavior too. Ledwell and King (2013) surveyed over 14,000 U.S. students in Grades 6–10 who had at least one living parent with whom they lived. The participants were questioned in regards to their experiences with physical bullying, verbal bullying, and relational bullying (having rumors or lies spread about them or being excluded from their group of friends). A second part of the survey questioned how experiencing bullying behavior affected them in aspects of depression, anxiety, and satisfaction of life. The third part of the survey measured parent-child communication and closeness. The researchers found that communication between parents and children about bullying incidents can help buffer the intensity of the child's reaction by acting as a sounding board.

School-based programs are the most effective at preventing bullying.

Antidiscrimination policies in schools should include sexual orientation (Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, & Watson, 2009). Swearer et al. (2010) conducted interviews with 22 school personnel who were Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) advisers in high schools (10 who worked in Georgia, and 12 who worked in other states across the country) in order to

determine what strategies supportive school personnel use to advocate for LGBT students. The researchers found that school policies should include diversity education for students and faculty as well as intervening directly with the perpetrators of bullying and teaching them how to engage in prosocial behaviors (Swearer et al., 2010). The best way to lessen the detrimental effects of LGBT discrimination in schools is to expand the supportive policies and services in schools for LGBT youth (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009). According to Strohmeier and Noam (2012), if educators would intervene, they could put an effective and efficient end to bullying. Because school-based programs are most effective in preventing bullying, then those programs should include measures that are specific to LGBT victims by offering them a safe place to share their experiences. Cowie (2011) suggested that children need to be given more opportunities to express their fears as well as to help create solutions. Furthermore, “increasing our understanding of bullying of lesbian and gay youth may contribute insights to the field of bullying in general, which has the potential to benefit all youth” (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2009, p.1611).

School climate can influence the amount of bullying that occurs among the students (Klein, Cornell, & Konold, 2012). The most effective antibullying programs engage schools in changing the practices and overall culture of the school (Strohmeier & Noam, 2012). Ttofi and Farrington (2011) affirmed that antibullying programs within the schools are effective. Within the schools, these programs need to be tailored to the school demographics and should be sensitive to the developmental stages of the students

as well as to the gender of the children in order to be most effective (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011). Fedewa and Ahn (2011) urged schools to educate all school personnel in creating a welcoming environment where LGBT bullying is not tolerated.

### **Definitions**

In this section, terms have been identified that are crucial to the understanding of the case study and need to be clarified for the reader. For the purposes of this study, these terms are defined below:

*Bullying:* For the purpose of this study, bullying is a repeated pattern of aggressive behavior that is unprovoked and intended to cause physical harm or mental anguish and involves an imbalance of power or strength (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodwin, & Austin, 2010; DeLara, 2012; Hong & Garbarino, 2012).

*Harassment:* For the purpose of this study, harassment is defined as humiliating and threatening actions exerted by one peer toward another that may include threats and demands aimed at making someone fearful or anxious. (Beran & Li, 2005)

*Heteronormativity:* For the purpose of this study, heteronormativity is the assumption that everyone identifies as heterosexual, that heterosexuality is the natural order of human sexuality and any other tendencies deviate from the norm (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; DePalma & Jennett, 2010).

*Heterosexism:* For the purpose of this study, heterosexism is the belief that heterosexuality is superior to, and excludes nonheterosexual people from policies, procedures, and activities (Robinson, 2010).

*Homophobia:* For the purpose of this study, homophobia is defined as the negative beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors directed toward sexual minorities (Hong & Garbarino, 2012).

*Sexual stigma:* For the purpose of this study, sexual stigma is the negative regard and inferior status that society collectively places upon nonheterosexual behaviors and persons (Vincent, Parrott, & Peterson, 2011).

### **Significance**

For a child to succeed in school, he or she needs to be provided a safe learning environment. Bullying of children in schools occurs from the first grade through the twelfth grade. The recent attention given to the issue of school bullying in the United States indicates the importance of preventing such activities from happening. However, researchers have indicated that LGBT children and youth are not experiencing as much protection in their schools as their heterosexual peers. Researchers have shown that LGBT students experience harassment more frequently than do their heterosexual peers (Robinson and Espelage, 2012). Researchers have also reported that such harassment and violence towards them contributes to poorer physical as well as mental health, higher rates of depression and anxiety, and a higher risk of suicidal tendencies (Hunt et al., 2012; Osvaldsson, 2011; Roberts et al., 2010; Robinson & Espelage, 2012). Suicides are not the only fatal result of experiencing harassment by peers. Researchers have shown that the predominant emotion raised as a result of bullying is anger, and many school shootings have been related to the aggressors previously being bullied.



In order to prevent children and youth from experiencing these negative effects of bullying and harassment, it is important to study the perceptions of the members of the school community in regards to LGBT bullying. By doing so, I can better understand the barriers standing in the way of providing specific protections for LGBT youth in school. The more I understand these barriers and the ideology behind them, the better equipped I become at removing them. The culture of the school community drives the practices of the school. Understanding the thinking behind a school's culture will enable me to see where I stand, and plan a strategy to change that culture if needed. Using the data that I obtain from the study, I can make the school community aware of their own perceptions and how they are affecting the children and youth. If I find that the majority support providing specific LGBT protection in the school's policies, then I can show them that as well, and help them initiate the change.

### **Guiding/Research Question**

There have been multiple studies done recently regarding LGBT bullying and the effects that such experiences have on youth. For example, Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, and Koenig (2011) tested the effects of homophobic victimization among approximately 16,000 adolescents in grades 7 through 12. They found that effects of bullying on grades, attendance, desire to graduate, and suicidality were significant and underscored the need for implementation of school policies that specifically address homophobic bullying. Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, and Azrael (2009) studied 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students and evaluated emotional distress they had experienced as a result of being bullied or harassed because others thought they were LGBT. They found that LGBT

youth were at higher risk of depression and suicidality than their heterosexual counterparts.

The underlying theme in these studies is that LGBT children who experience harassment and violence based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation are at higher risk of harmful effects such as depression, anxiety, poorer physical and mental health, and suicidal tendencies than the heterosexual children who experience other forms of bullying. Through personal interviews, I propose to turn the focus of my study on the local community members of MTS Elementary School in regards to LGBT bullying and what should be done about this issue.

Therefore, the guiding/research questions for this case study are:

1. How do adult members of a rural elementary school community in Tennessee perceive the problem of LGBT -based student bullying, harassment, and violence?
2. How do adult members of a rural elementary school community in Tennessee perceive the utility of the school's zero-tolerance anti-bullying policy in addressing bullying, harassment, and violence against LGBT students?
3. How do adult members of a rural elementary school community in Tennessee perceive the possibility of initiating a change in school policy to address the prevention of bullying, harassment, and violence against LGBT students?
  - (a) How would they consider changing school policy in order to serve this purpose?
  - (b) How might the school obtain the support of the school community in changing policy?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is that of anti-bias education, in which a climate of positive self-identity is created to help each child reach his or her full potential (Teaching for a Change, 2014). Anti-bias education can aid in preventing LGBT bullying and discrimination through awareness and appreciation of diversity. According to Brown (2011), anti-bias education is a curriculum in which children learn about the negative consequences of discrimination and stereotypes through intervention programs. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) described four goals of anti-bias education. The first goal is one of self-awareness in which children demonstrate confidence and pride in who they are. The second goal is acceptance of human diversity, in which children begin to develop deep connections with people who are different than themselves. The third goal is for children to recognize unfairness in society and develop an understanding of how unfairness hurts people. The fourth goal is to empower the children to act against discrimination and prejudice.

Additionally, anti-bias education involves more than just educating the children. Hohensee and Derman-Sparks (2010) indicated that there are two phases to implementing anti-bias education. In the first phase, the teachers become self-aware of their own biases and bias-related issues in relation to themselves, their community, and the children they teach. During the second phase, teachers begin implementing anti-bias activities in the classroom based on observations and interviews with the children. Teachers also begin involving parents during this second phase. Teachers then adapt the curriculum to the changing needs of the children.

The bullying that LGBT students are experiencing often is a direct result of bias on the part of the aggressor. Biases and negative stereotypes in regards to diversity in our society is a detriment to our children's social development and ability to effectively interact with others (Hohensee & Derman-Sparks, n.d.). Furthermore, Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) stated that biased behaviors, such as teasing and exclusion based on part of a child's identity is just as serious as harmful as physical aggression.

The conceptual framework of anti-bias education can give direction to the study by including teachers, parents, and administration. Bullying in schools is a problem that inherently involves issues of bias and identity. I did not select the framework because of a presumption that participants are necessarily biased against LGBT youth, but instead see anti-bias education as a means for framing the collection and analysis of data. The theoretical underpinnings of anti-bias education will aid in understanding the current dynamics of bullying in the school under investigation and also will provide potential insight into ways to improve the situation.

In her mixed methods field design, Dessel (2010) tested the effectiveness of an intergroup dialogue intervention on the attitudes and behaviors of teachers toward LGBT students. The tests indicated that participation in intergroup dialogue resulted in significant positive changes in attitudes and behaviors.

An antibias education program of teaching early adolescents about gender discrimination was examined by Pahlke, Bigler, and Green (2010). They showed that those children who received lessons that included information about gender

discrimination had higher levels of awareness of gender discrimination as well as a desire to combat it.

A search for pertinent topics relating to the bullying and harassment of school children and youth was completed using the Walden University Library. Among the terms used to search for articles were, “anti-bullying”, “LGBT bullying”, “LGBT youth”, “harassment of LGBT youth”, and “school bullying programs”. The search provided several topics of importance and relevance. These topics include Bullying Adolescents, Prevalence of Bullying Against LGBT Students, Effects of Bullying on Children and Adolescents, The Role of School Climate on LGBT Bullying, A Need for Elementary Intervention, The Role of the Community, and Prevention of LGBT Bullying.

### **Bullying of Adolescents**

In their examination of the answers of 7,559 adolescents ranging in age from 14-22 on the Growing Up Today Study, Berlan et al. (2010) found that bullying is an aggressive form of behavior that negatively affects the health of children and youth in our schools, often targets those children who are perceived to be different than the norm, and has a tendency to disproportionately affect LGBT adolescents. Bullying is a type of aggressive behavior that causes physical or mental harm and can come from individuals or groups of students and can be perceived acceptable within the school climate (Cowie, 2011; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Hunt, Peters, & Rapee, 2012). Bullying can involve several participants, including : (a) the bully; (b) the victim; (c) assistants to the bully, who are peers who actively help the bully; (d) reinforcers, who escalate the bullying by encouraging the bully or laughing at the victim; (e) outsiders, who are aware of the

bullying but take no action to prevent or stop it; (f) defenders, who take an active role in stopping or attempting to prevent the bullying (Cowie, 2011).

Kopels and Paceley (2012) suggested there can be direct and indirect experiences of bullying. Direct experiences include the specific acts that are targeted toward the victim and indirect experiences refer to those who witness or are aware of the bullying, but are not the targets. Bullying within the school systems can include name calling, rejection of peers, exclusion from activities, having rumors spread about the victim, and cyberbullying (Bauman & Newman, 2013). Cyber bullying is less common and uses information and communication technology to harm the victim by negatively affecting his or her social status, relationships, and/or reputation (Ortega et al., 2009; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011).

In a study done to determine the effectiveness of an LGBT led intervention that used theater and dialogue as a tool to inform and improve the safety of school systems for LGBT youth, Wernick et al. (2013) analyzed the outcomes for middle and high school students who viewed a theatrical performance regarding LGBT bullying and participated in a group discussion afterward. They found that students who attended the performances and participated in the discussion afterwards reported that they would be more likely to intervene when witnessing LGBT bullying. Wernick et al. found that LGBT youth-led education and intervention using performance along with group dialogue is effective in preventing bullying against LGBT students.

The effect of intergroup dialogue intervention on teacher attitudes and behaviors toward LGBT students was tested by Dessel (2010) in a mixed methods study using pre

and post-quantitative surveys and qualitative analysis of post-interviews. Dessel found significant positive changes in teacher attitudes about civil rights and Gays and Lesbians for those who participated in the dialogue.

### **Prevalence of Bullying Against LGBT Students**

In general, discrimination and hate crimes against LGBT adults are prevalent in the United States, with 50% of all Gay men and Lesbians experiencing verbal abuse, and more than 20% experiencing some form of a physical crime, as is the prejudice and bullying experienced by students in public school settings (Dessel, 2010; Vincent, Parrott, & Peterson, 2011). LGBT students experience homophobic bullying by their peers ranging from verbal insults to physical assault more frequently than African Americans, Muslims, and students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Berlan et al., 2010; Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Dessel, 2010; Sherriff et al., 2011).

In a survey of 6,667 Grade 7 and 8 students in a large Midwestern county, Birkett, Espelage, and Koenig (2009) sought to identify instances of bullying, teasing, drug use, depression, and truancy for self-identified LGBT students. Of the students who participated in the survey, 50.7% were male and 49.3% were female. In the study, 13.8% of the males identified as homosexual or bisexual and 9.5% of the females identified as lesbian or bisexual. Birkett et al. found that students who were questioning their sexuality experienced the most bullying, followed closely by LGB students. Heterosexual students experienced the least amount of bullying.

Sexual minority adolescents are at a significantly higher risk of being the victim of school bullying than their heterosexual peers (Hightow-Weidman et al., 2011; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Mishna et al., 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2012). In their study of young men who have sex with men (YMSM), ages 13-24, who participated in the Special Projects of National Significance Initiative, Hightow-Weidman et al. (2011) sought to assess the prevalence of racial and sexual identity-based abuse. The participants were from New York, North Carolina, Illinois, Michigan, Texas, and California and identified as homosexual minorities. Hightow-Weidman et al. found that “74.1% of the participants reported that they were made fun of because of their sexuality, with more than half (55%) reporting that these experiences were somewhat or very stressful” (p. S41). They also found that 58% reported being treated unfairly because of their sexuality, and 57% reported being physically abused because of their sexuality.

Not only are LGBT youth at a higher risk of being bullied, but LGBT youth experience higher levels of violence, abuse and discrimination than those who are bullied for other reasons (Gerouki, 2010; Swearer et al., 2008). Of those LGBT students who are bullied, it is the ones who are perceived to be gender nonconforming who are at greater risk of being targets. Heteronormativity is often enforced through the school environment, daily interactions between students and teachers, in the curriculum, and in extra-curricular activities such as the reinforcement of masculine gender norms through middle and high school football rituals (Steinfeldt et al., 2012; Vincent, Parrott & Peterson, 2011; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). For example, in their study of 241 heterosexual men, aged 18-30 years old, in a southeastern United States city, Vincent,



Parrott, and Peterson (2011) sought to test their hypotheses that aggression toward gay men and lesbians was directly related to anti-femininity norms, toughness norms, and sexual prejudice. They stated in the results that “traditional male gender norms of status, toughness, and anti-femininity, and religious fundamentalism exercised an effect on aggression toward gay men and lesbians either directly, indirectly, or both” (p. 392).

### **Effects of Bullying on Children and Adolescents**

Bullying is a worldwide problem in schools, and has some major implications for children and adolescents who are victimized, especially for those who are bullied based on their sexual orientation, or perceived sexuality (Swearer et al., 2010). LGBT students who experience being victims of bullying are at greater risk of experiencing high levels of anger and aggression toward the bullies, including homicidal ideation and action (Berlan et al., 2010; DeLara, 2012; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Ortega et al., 2009; Swearer et al., 2010; Vincent, Parrott, & Peterson, 2011). In a study involving a sample of 1,671 students from seven secondary schools in Cordoba, Spain, whose ages ranged from 12 to 17, Ortega et al. (2009) sought to identify and analyze the emotional impact of bullying victims. Their findings indicated that 41.5% of those students experiencing direct bullying felt anger. Twenty-eight percent reported being upset or stressed as a result of the bullying, and 25.7 % admitted to being embarrassed by being the target of the bullies (p. 200). Victimization for LGBT youth can also negatively affect the child’s perceived quality of life due to a heightened sense of inferiority and may even result in the child becoming intensely homophobic, themselves (Connolly, 2012; DePalma &

Jennett, 2010; Mishna et al., 2009; Patrick et al., 2013; Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012; Robinson, 2010).

An analysis of the 2010 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey (HYS) data on students in grades 8-12 in Washington State classrooms was conducted by Patrick, et al. (2013). Their intent was to examine the association between perceived sexual orientation, bullying, and the quality of life among US adolescents. Their results indicated that there was a significant impact of bullying because of perceived sexual orientation on the quality of life of adolescents, and a prevalence of depression-related symptoms. The lower quality of life adds to intense feelings of depression, which places the youth at a higher risk of having suicidal ideation, attempting and completing suicide (Berlan et al., 2010; Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; DeLara, 2012; Dessel, 2010; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014; Meyer & Bayer, 2013; Mustanski & Liu, 2013; Ploderl & Fartacek, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2012; Saewyc, 2011). Two hundred thirty-seven youth between the ages of 16-20 years participated in a study by Mustanski and Liu (2013) to examine LGBT specific risk and protective factors for suicide attempts. Participants completed questionnaires that measured "general risk factors for suicide attempts, including hopelessness, impulsiveness, and perceived social support" (p. 437). Seven variables were found to be "related to lifetime history of attempted suicide: hopelessness, depression symptoms, conduct disorder symptoms, impulsivity, victimization, age of first same-sex attraction, and low family support" (p. 437). In another study, Almeida et al. (2009) evaluated the emotional distress among students in 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grades in Boston, MA. They used a two-stage, stratified random sampling

strategy to evaluate data from the Boston Survey. They randomly selected thirty-two schools, 18 of which agreed to participate. They found that “girls and boys in the sample were more likely than their heterosexual, non-transgendered peers to have emotional distress as demonstrated by higher levels of depressive symptoms, and a greater likelihood of reporting self-harm and suicidal ideation” (p. 10).

Being involved in bullying is associated with many negative health indicators for LGBT children and youth, such as having high levels of anxiety, a higher rate of drug use, and are at a higher risk of being overweight or underweight than their heterosexual peers (Berlan et al., 2010; DeLara, 2012; Fedewa & Ahn, 2011; Gerouki, 2010; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Hunt, Peters, & Rapee, 2012; Kopels & Pacey, 2012; Mishna et al., 2009; Rivers & Noret, 2010; Robinson, 2010; Saewyc, 2011). For example, a research synthesis of 18 published and unpublished studies was conducted by Fedewa and Ahn (2011), in which they examined the relationship between bullying, peer victimization, and physical, social, and mental health outcomes. They found that suicidal ideation, sexual and physical abuse, mental health problems, and substance use were all significantly higher occurrences in sexual minority youth victims than in heterosexual youth victims of bullying.

The negative effects on LGBT youth who experience being bullied in school can be immediate, such as a higher rate of absenteeism at school because they do not feel safe there, and lower academic performance in school (Dessel, 2010; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Kopels & Pacey, 2012). Birkett, Espelage, and Koenig (2009) used data from the Dane County Youth Assessment to test their hypothesis that LGB and Questioning

students experience more depression/suicidal feelings, more drug use, and more truancy than their heterosexual peers. Twenty-seven middle schools representing 80% of the 7<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> graders in the county participated in the assessment. Their findings confirmed that LGB and Questioning students experienced more drug use and truancy. Victimization for LGBT students can have long term effects that follow these youths into their adulthood and can be felt throughout the lifespan in terms of adult mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (DeLara, 2012; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Vincent, Parrott, & Peterson, 2011).

### **The Role of School Climate on LGBT Bullying**

School climate is an important factor in either promoting or preventing bullying against LGBT youth and determining their experiences and attitudes toward school (Hong, Espelage, & Kral, 2011; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Swearer et al., 2010). A positive school climate translates to students feeling safe, and LGBT youth who report greater feelings of safety at school are less likely to be victimized, alienated, depressed, and have suicidal ideation (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014; Macgillivray, 2008; Poteat, Mereish, & DiGiovanni, 2011). A school climate that is positive, welcoming, and protective of its LGBT students will decrease the risk of harmful behaviors such as substance abuse and aggression (Klein, Cornell, & Konold, 2012).

School climates can also be hostile and unsafe for LGBT students by being unresponsive to bullying and aggression and by supporting heteronormativity (Vega et al., 2012). Many schools reproduce and reaffirm assumptions that everyone is or should

be heterosexual and by doing so, reward conformity and alienate those who do not conform (Dessel, 2010; Payne & Smith, 2012; Vega, Crawford, & VanPelt, 2012). Classic examples of heteronormative ideation are formal school activities such as Homecoming king and queen and school dances where heterosexuality is rewarded (Payne & Smith, 2012).

Students can be inhibited about reporting instances of bullying in an environment where they do not feel safe, and where they do not feel that there will be any action taken by a teacher or administrator, yet when teachers and school personnel are involved and demonstrate that they care, students are more likely to report instances of bullying which, in turn, reduces the amount of bullying that occurs (Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Vega et al., 2012).

### **A Need for Elementary Intervention**

There is a need for elementary school personnel to develop a positive and supportive environment for students who do not conform to traditional gender norms due to a high prevalence of bullying and harassment toward children younger than age 12 (Swearer et al., 2008; Roberts et al., 2010). Children are continually discovering who they are from first through twelfth grade and are vulnerable to cultural prejudices and forced heteronormativity (Connolly, 2012; DePalma & Jennett, 2010). Worldwide, primary school age children disclose predispositions to behave in ways that do not conform to heteronormative; these nonconformities include boys with effeminate gestures and attractions to stereotypically “girl” toys and games (Gerouki, 2010; McIntyre, 2009; Cullen & Sandy, 2009). Victimization of LGBT youth has occurred in

elementary schools and the harmful effects of bullying are more extreme for the younger sexual-minority youth and for the older sexual-minority youth (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011; Mishna et al., 2009).

### **The Role of the Community**

It is important to look at the community as a whole when examining the experiences of LGBT youth and the contributors to the experiences they face as children. From a school standpoint, teachers who were perceived to be passive or unsupportive indirectly contributed to and encouraged the acts of aggression being perpetrated on LGBT students because they tend not to report those instances when they feel there will be nothing done about it (DeLara, 2012; Mishna et al., 2009; Zack, Mannheim, & Alfano, 2010). In a study of four high schools in New York with a total student population of 3,000, DeLara (2012) conducted focus groups of students who were selected by principals and counselors. The students who participated in the study stated that they found it difficult to report bullying incidents to an adult. The reasons they cited for not reporting the incidents were inaction of the adults whenever it was reported, concern for confidentiality, and fear of not being taken seriously. According to Kopels and Paceley (2012), more than half of the students they studied reported that school personnel intervened in bullying against LGBT students only some or none of the time. For these reasons, it is important that teachers are trained how to detect bullying in school and how to best intervene and prevent those acts of aggression (Strohmeier & Noam, 2012). Part of that training should focus on them reflecting on their own feelings and possible biases because their personal experiences can influence the way in which they deal with

aggressive behavior directed toward LGBT students (Gerouki, 2010; Sleetter & Owuor, 2011).

Parental support or lack thereof can have a dramatic effect on LGBT youth by causing the additional stress of being rejected by parents. In turn, this rejection heightens the chances of mental health problems and raises the risk of them using illegal drugs, feelings of depression, and attempting suicide (D'Augelli et al., 2010; Haas et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2010; Shilo & Savaya, 2011). In a longitudinal study conducted over the course of two years, D'Augelli et al (2010) examined factors associated with GLB youths' parents' knowledge of their children's sexual orientation. Over a two-year period, a sample of 528 self-identified GLB youths in New York City and the surrounding suburbs were interviewed three separate occasions. They found that the youth whose parents learned of their sexual orientation during the study experienced less internalized homophobia; whereas, the youth who remained closeted due to lack of parental support reported the most internalized homophobia. Conversely, acceptance and support from parents and family has a positive effect on self-esteem, mental and physical health, reduces the risk of suicide ideation, and improves academic performance (Mishna et al., 2009; Mustanski & Liu, 2013; Ryan et al., 2010; Shilo & Savaya, 2011).

Religion and religious groups have been noted as a factor that inhibits teachers from showing compassion for or defending LGBT students from bullying for fear of retributions from conservative religious groups who tend to be the most heteronormative in practice and prejudiced against homosexuals (DePalma & Jennett, 2010; Dessel, 2010; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009).

### **Implications**

This study collected data from various adult members of the MTS community in regards to LGBT students and LGBT-based bullying. Research shows a need for LGBT-specific provisions in school anti-bullying programs. Interviewing adult members of the MTS community provide insight into the existing barriers that inhibit the support and protection of the LGBT student population. Through the collection of data, it was anticipated that a revision to the current anti-bullying policy of MTS might occur in which specific protections for LGBT students could be created. Another possible implication may be the beginning of a community discussion and an awareness of the plight of the LGBT population, as well as self-awareness in regards to the feelings of the adults who would potentially be instrumental in initiating support programs as well as the prevention of LGBT-based bullying and harassment.

The results of this study may be used to determine if a revision to the existing anti-bullying policy at MTS is supported by the school community. Anticipating a commonality of wanting what is best for the children, and based on information gained from the interviews, recommendations for an alternative policy may be written and presented to the MTS school administration and behavior committee for approval.

### **Summary**

The national problem of bullying in our public schools is well documented. Research shows that LGBT children and youth are more likely to experience bullying in the forms of harassment and physical violence. LGBT-based bullying also has more



harmful effects on the victims than does other types of bullying. These effects include severe depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies, poorer physical and mental health, and poorer academic achievement.

Studies have shown that bullying occurs in all grade levels, from 1<sup>st</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup>, and have recommended that schools include provisions in their policies to offer support to their LGBT population and specifically deal with LGBT-based bullying. MTS, an elementary school in rural Tennessee has no specific provisions in its anti-bullying policy to protect students against LGBT harassment. It is the goal of this case study to look at the perceptions of adult members of the school community in regards to the bullying of LGBT students, supporting those students and offering LGBT-specific protection from harassment and violence in the school's bullying policy.

In the next sections of this study, the qualitative methodology used is explained in depth, as well as a description of the potential participants, data collection methods, data analysis, and the limitations to the study. The Project section describes the findings of the study and how they relate to the chosen proposed project. Then reflections of the completed study are discussed including applications, implications, and directions for future research. Appendix A includes the completed project intended to address the guiding problem of the study.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to better understand parents', teachers', and administrators' perceptions of the bullying of LGBT students at MTS Elementary School and to gain a better understanding of the barriers that are keeping LGBT students from feeling safe in this school, which could translate to what is happening in schools across the state of Tennessee. In this section, the research method, data sources, data collection, and data analysis intended for this study are discussed.

### **Research Design**

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers are interested in understanding human lived experience; how they interpret them, what they mean to them, and how they help build their worlds. This study used qualitative research to inquire into the perceptions of adult members of a school community regarding LGBT bullying of youth. I attempted to determine how the participants interpret and give meaning to those experiences in the context of the political and social landscape I described above.

This was a qualitative instrumental case study in which the goal was to gain an understanding of how adult community members in a Middle Tennessee school (MTS) perceive the issue of LGBT-based bullying, harassment, and violence and how the school's anti-bullying policy applies to LGBT students. According to Yin (2014), "a case study allows investigators to focus on a 'case' and retain a holistic and real-world perspective" (p. 4). Qualitative case studies explore a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources, or lenses, allowing for multiple facets of the phenomenon

to be understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This was done through the perceptions and experiences of a variety of adult members of the school community, including teachers, counselors, and parents. Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010) stated that the purpose of case study research is to gain in-depth understanding of a situation.

Yin (2014) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context...” (p. 16). The phenomenon explored in this study is the bullying of LGBT students at MTS Elementary School. By focusing on a particular practice at a particular school, I am separating it out for research and the number of people who could be interviewed is limited, which constitutes a bounded system according to Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010). Case studies allow researchers to focus on a case, such as “individual life cycles, small group behavior, organizational and managerial processes, neighborhood change ...” (Yin, p.4). Because the objective of this study was to illuminate the conditions of a common issue, the lack of protection for LGBT students within the school policy, it is a single case study (Yin, 2014). According to Baxter and Jack (2008), a case study examines a case in-depth in order to provide insight into an issue. In this study, the issue is the bullying that occurs at MTS Elementary School to the LGBT students. I sought to gain insight into what factors or ideologies may be barriers to the school specifically protecting LGBT students in their anti-bullying policy.

In this study I focused on the bullying that occurs at MTS School, particularly the bullying against the students who are, or are perceived to be, non-conforming to the heteronormative culture. Through the information gained during the interviews, I also

evaluated the effectiveness of the anti-bullying program to adequately protect the LGBT population of the school. However, “program evaluation is used for decision-making purposes whereas research is used to build our general understanding and knowledge on a particular topic and to inform practice” (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The main purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of any barriers that may be standing in the way of the school’s ability to provide protection to its LGBT students. Therefore, a case study was the best option since I was looking for an in-depth analysis of the bullying issue at MTS School, and the effectiveness of their current policy in protecting LGBT, or perceived LGBT, students.

### **Data Sources**

This study evaluated data from personal interviews conducted with adult stakeholders of the MTS community. These stakeholders include teachers, counselors, administration, and parents of children who attend MTS.

### **Participants**

The focus of this case study was to better understand community stakeholders’ perceptions of the bullying of LGBT students and the barriers that are keeping them from feeling safe in schools. In keeping with this focus, there was one primary group and three other groups of individuals who were able to provide insight regarding the issue of anti-LGBT bullying in schools. The primary group provided the majority of the data collected consisted of the teachers employed at MTS since they are the ones who are charged with the day-to-day implementation of the anti-bullying policy and are most likely to observe such occurrences of bullying. Secondary groups include MTS

counselors, administrators, and parents of students currently enrolled at MTS. The individuals in the secondary groups are involved with the anti-bullying program inasmuch as their job requires or as it affects their child. The total number of participants was 14.

### **Selection Criteria and Sampling Method**

The participants in this case study consisted of MTS teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents whose children currently attend MTS. The research site is an elementary school with students in Grades K-5. The primary group had 7 participants, consisting of at least one teacher from each grade level along with cocurricular teachers (teachers who teach Art, Music, P/E, Computer, and Library Science). The secondary group consisted of one of the two administrators, both of the school counselors, and four parents of children attending MTS, making the total number of participants 14. The participants from the primary group consisted of teachers who were able to give the greatest insight and understanding of the effectiveness of the anti-bullying policy, so there were more interviews from this group. The participants from the secondary groups consisted of administrators and counselors who provided insight into the implementation and administration of the anti-bullying policy. The other participants from the secondary group, consisting of the parents of students currently attending the school, provided perceptions of the community outside of the boundaries of the school building and the perceived need of their children.

I used analytic generalizations to generalize the “findings or lessons learned...that go beyond the setting for the specific case.”(Yin, 2014, p. 40) These generalizations may

result from building on the theoretical propositions that formed the basis of the case study at the beginning, or a new generalization may come to light from the findings of the case study (Yin, 2014).

At the time of this study, at MTS, there are 70 teachers, two administrators (one principal and one assistant principal), two school counselors, and approximately 980 students currently enrolled. It was difficult to establish an exact sample size based on the number of possible participants. The sample was bounded by conducting the study and reaching the point where new “information is of decreasing relevance to the case” (Yin, 2014, p. 203).

#### **Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants**

In preparation for conducting a case study at MTS, I spoke with the principal of the school. I informed him of the study and my desire to interview teachers, staff, and parents on site. I obtained verbal permission from the principal, and after I obtained IRB approval (approval #01-05-16-0288372) from Walden University, I submitted a written request to the school administration, providing them with the purpose of the study, intended participants, how long the study will take, the time of day at which the interviews will be conducted in order to not disrupt the normal daily routine of the school, how the identities of the participants will be protected, and what will be done with my findings. Participation was completely voluntary.

#### **Researcher-Participant Relationship**

It is important to develop a positive working relationship with the participants of a research study, which will help establish trust (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). A

good part of establishing a positive working relationship with potential participants was accomplished due to the fact that at the time of this study, I was a teacher at MTS. The faculty is a close-knit and supportive group of educators, and I had established a positive relationship with my coworkers by serving on committees, cosponsoring clubs, and serving in leadership roles within my grade level. All interactions between administrators, faculty, staff, and myself have been positive and those who know I am currently working on obtaining an EdD have been supportive and encouraging of me the entire time. I had also established positive relationships with parents of the students at MTS. Being one of three male teachers in the school makes it easier for parents to take notice of me. One of my duties at school is to oversee those students who arrive before school starts each morning, so I have had the opportunity to interact with students from all grade levels, and those interactions are mostly positive. Personal qualities that have been commented on include my easy going nature, my friendliness, and sense of humor.

A possible negative aspect to conducting the case study at the school where I worked was that some teachers, staff, and parents might feel as though they were being pressured into participating due to their established relationship with me. It was crucial for me to make it clear that participation is strictly voluntary, and that there would be no hard feelings if they chose not to participate.

Having taught at MTS for seven years, I had an understanding of the policies and procedures of the school, which afforded me the opportunity to relate to the participants of the study. However, being a part of the staff had the potential to cause some unintended pressure for colleagues to participate in the study. It was important for me to

be straightforward with those invited to participate about it being totally voluntary and to not imply any repercussions if they chose not to participate. One way in which this was accomplished was that, although I was still a coworker, I was not in a position of authority over any of them. Since the participants were going to be interviewed, it was important to start each interview with small talk in order to develop rapport (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) and to put them at ease to express whatever they think and not worry about saying what they think I want them to say.

### **Ethical Considerations and Safeguards**

In order to protect the participants, I obtained informed consent by disclosing the measures that would be used and what treatments would be given to them (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtli, 2010). In order to gain informed consent, I spoke to each participant to ensure they were fully aware of the nature of the case and that their participation was completely voluntary and would remain anonymous and confidential (Yin, 2014). This included guidelines of the study that ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants and the data that are collected from the interviews.

### **Data Collection**

Through confidential individual interviews with parents of school age children (whether or not their children identify as LGBT), teachers, and administrators in the MTS school community, I collected data that included the experiences and perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators in regards to LGBT students and the bullying that is being perpetrated against them. The following questions were developed to guide the interviews:



1. How would you describe the culture of the school in relation to students who are, or are perceived to be, LGBT?
2. How important do you perceive protecting LGBT students to be?
3. Would you be supportive of or opposed to programs in the school that would address this issue? Why?
4. How would you describe the effectiveness of the anti-bullying policy?

The data were analyzed to identify the need, if any, of LGBT specific bullying programs as well as the barriers that stand in the way of LGBT -based anti-bullying programs being implemented in the school systems.

Collection of data was a multi-step process. Preliminary verbal approval of the MTS principal was obtained to access and conduct research activities. Written authorization was granted by the school administration once I submitted a letter of cooperation and data use agreement in accordance with Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were recruited via written invitations distributed throughout MTS School, sent home with students, and through email and local community websites. I sent out approximately 50 invitations to participate and obtained 15 participants as a result. Data was collected through individual, in-depth, face-to-face interviews scheduled at a time and place of each participant's choosing. The interviews lasted 20 to 30 minutes and were audio taped and transcribed. I met with each participant a second time, and copies of the transcripts were offered to the participants in order for verification of accuracy. The audio tapes and transcripts are kept in a locked safe at my

home. Participant identities were coded to ensure confidentiality. I anticipated the interview process to last between two and four weeks depending upon participants' schedules and availability, and it actually took three weeks to complete the interviews. I was fortunate that I only needed the initial interviews for the majority of the participants. I did follow up with a couple of participants to ask a couple more questions and get additional information.

A secondary source of data was the school's official bullying policy. I obtained a copy of the written policy from the guidance counselors. This provided evidence of the official stance of the school towards bullying in general as well as bullying specifically targeted at LGBT or perceived LGBT students. Examining a secondary source of data aided in triangulating the data. As Yin (2014) stated, "When you have really triangulated the data, the case study's findings will have been supported by more than a single source of evidence (p121). Another way to triangulate the data is to interview a variety of people. According to Thurmond (2001), having a variance of people increases the chances of finding atypical data or finding similar patterns, thus increasing confidence in the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is an inductive process in which multiple small pieces of data are collected and combined to form broader, more general descriptions and conclusions (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtli, 2010). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stated that analysis "involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns" (p. 159).

The source of data in this study was in-depth interviews with teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The transcriptions were read and notes taken to determine any themes. As I read each transcript, I highlighted statements that were made by each that I felt were valuable to the study. Different colors of highlighters were used so that statements that were similar were easily identifiable. A spreadsheet was then created in Excel listing each participant and condensed versions of their responses to each guiding question, so that they could easily be sorted together. Once the sorting was done, the four themes became evident. In reviewing the themes identified, a narrative has been created that accurately reflects the information obtained in the interviews.

### **Evidence of Accuracy and Credibility**

Credibility of qualitative research refers to how accurately the participants' perceptions of the information given in the interviews matches up with how the researcher portrays them in the research report (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtli, 2010). One method I used to ensure credibility is triangulation. According to Yin (2014), triangulation is "the convergence of data collected from different sources, to determine the consistency of a finding" (p. 241). When the data collected are in alignment with the information reported, credibility is established (Creswell, 2012). By using multiple sources of data in a case study, the researcher is able to generalize the data through comparing the information obtained from each source and determining their commonality (Yin, 2014). In order to triangulate the data, I compared the information obtained through teacher interviews with information obtained from counselor, parent, and

administrator interviews to identify commonalities. Another method I used to ensure credibility is member checking. Member checking involves asking participants to review and provide feedback on the researcher's emerging findings to verify that there is no misunderstanding on the researcher's part (Merriam, 2009). After transcribing, coding, and analyzing data from interviews, I invited participants to review my findings from their interview to verify accuracy. In addition to triangulation and member checking to ensure credibility, the possibility of researcher bias was continually addressed. Throughout the interview process, I kept a check on what my perceptions are and made a concerted effort to remain objective when asking follow-up questions. I also let the participants read the transcripts of their interviews to ensure there is no bias in the transcription. Any discrepant information that emerged was looked at for new themes that add to the understanding of the study, and were added accordingly.

### **Conclusion**

This was a qualitative instrumental case study in which I interviewed adult members of the MTS Elementary School community. The issue being illuminated was the lack of protection for LGBT students within the school's anti-bullying policy.

Once IRB approval was received from Walden University, I obtained permission from the Principal of MTS. Personal interviews were conducted with volunteer participants comprised of teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents of MTS students at a time that was convenient to the participants. There were 14 interviews of participants who were chosen through purposeful sampling since they were all adults within the MTS school community.

The audio tapes of the interviews were transcribed and kept in a locked safe away from the school to ensure confidentiality. Information from the interviews was coded for analysis of the content and identification of themes. A narrative was created to reflect the information obtained in the interviews. Credibility was ensured through triangulation and member checking.

### **Qualitative Results**

The aim of this research project was to explore and better understand parents', teachers', and administrators' perceptions of the bullying of LGBT students at MTS Elementary School and to gain a better understanding of the barriers that are keeping LGBT students from feeling safe in this school, which could translate to what is happening in schools across the state of Tennessee. Fifteen adult members of the school community were recruited via written invitations distributed throughout MTS School, sent home with students, and through email.

This section presents the significant elements identified during the interviews. Some actual responses of the participants are included in this section offer the reader a deeper insight into the school culture, the community mindset, as well as the current policies. These responses are based on perceptions of adult members of the school community. Likert and Likert (1976) described the significance of perceptions, by stating:

People act on the basis of what they perceive the situation to be, whether the perceptions are accurate or grossly inaccurate. Since behavior is based on perceptions, the existence of each of them is a fact to be considered. Similarly, the frustrations, attitudes, loyalties,

and hostilities felt by each member and the information and misinformation possessed by each are facts as is their evaluation of the merits and desirability of each particular course of action under consideration (p.165).

### **School Culture**

In response to the question, *How would you describe the culture of the school in relation to students who are, or are perceived to be LGBT?* The majority of participants stated they believe that all teachers are accepting of these students.

Teacher G agreed with the majority and stated: "I think some teachers are personally against that lifestyle, but in their professional life, they are dedicated to protecting all students." Teacher E responded: "From what I know of the staff and teachers, I think they are tolerant." Administrator A stated: "I think the culture of our school here for the most part is...I think it's very accepting, at least the people that I know and am familiar with." Counselor B commented: "As a school I do think we do a really good job of being inclusive, we're a big family, even among the staff that's how it is here. So I think the culture is pretty good." Teacher A expressed a different perception when speaking of how teachers and staff react to students saying negative things about people who are LGBT by stating: "[As for] the staff, I think most people just turn it into a humorous situation, but don't turn it into a 'we need to correct these students'."

When it came to the subject of parents, six participants believed that parents in the community are not accepting of nonheteronormative, or LGBT children at this age. Four believed parents in the community are supportive, and two believed that the parents in this school community are somewhat accepting and supportive. Teacher B echoed the

majority sentiment by stating: “I do feel like this could be a harsh environment for them...based on the kinds of children we have here and the kind of upbringing they’re having.”

Teacher E commented: “I could see some of our parents being not ok.”

Parent A responded: “Based on location being here in the South, I think that people here are a little more closed minded than they would be in other regions of the country. I think the biggest issue is students not having anybody they can truly trust or talk to.”

Parent B stated: “The culture in this community is not as tolerant from what I’ve seen.”

When speaking of whether the children in this community are accepting, five participants believed that the children are all accepting of each other. Four believed that most children are accepting of each other’s differences, and three people stated they did not think the children of this community are supportive or accepting of other children who are LGBT. Teacher A, when commenting about children’s acceptance, stated: “They’re open about it because they don’t understand it yet, and the others don’t understand it, so they accept it. They haven’t been taught whether it’s right or wrong.”

Teacher C suggested that children this age are unaware by stating: “In elementary school I think even the kids that may become that way and dress that way don’t even know that they’re that way yet. They just know this is what I want to dress like because I like it. The other kids don’t realize it either. The year I had the little boy who dressed

differently and ran around with the girls, the other kids didn't bully him, they just didn't look at him, and so he really was nonexistent.”

Teacher E agreed that the kids are not aware by stating: “at this age they're just a little bit naïve to it still. They don't really know. We have one kindergarten girl who, since the first of the year, has transitioned into a little boy. And the boys play with her and there's no harm done.”

Teacher F told of an experience: “I had a boy who had an earring and long hair and a pretty face, but he acted masculine. I thought he was [gay]. I didn't see him being treated differently. I didn't see him being picked on or being called 'sissy boy'. In fact, a girl had a crush on him.”

Teacher G commented: “As far as the kids, I think there are some who come through this school who have definite LGBT tendencies, although I believe they are too young to fully understand what that means for them or to identify as LGBT. I have noticed some kids, especially in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades, using the word 'gay' as an insult to other students, or make a blanket statement that 'that's so gay'.”

Teacher B responded: “Based on the kinds of children we have here and the kind of upbringing they're having, I'm afraid that in that sense it would be a very difficult environment.”

Two participants believed that this is not an issue at this age, and one stated they have not witnessed any bullying of LGBT students or students who are perceived to be LGBT. Counselor A responded: “I would say that's not a big part of our culture at this



school.” Parent A stated: “I personally haven’t noticed any students [who are] in the LGBT community.”

### **Importance of Protecting LGBT Students**

In response to the question, *How important do you perceive protecting LGBT students to be?* The majority of those interviewed believed protecting LGBT students to be very important. Teacher E stated: “I think it’s very important...they say a lot of children’s suicides are because they are afraid to come out and say that they are lesbian or gay...and social media is so awful to these kids. The more we can make kids aware that (1) it is ok and you always have someone to talk to and (2) if they are being bullied they need to talk to somebody. I think it should be talked about. That it is ok that some people are this way and some people are that way and you need to respect everybody. I think if we could be more open to education it could help the bullying and it would help a lot of kids that would hurt themselves.”

Counselor A explained similar thoughts: “[I think it’s] very important. This time of their life is very formative years and the very beginning of them figuring out who they are, and so, protecting them [is] very important to their self-esteem, their identity, it’s something that will go with them throughout their life, it can really affect them for many years.”

Teacher A commented: “At this level, I think it’s very important. Kids at this level...when they start to realize their sexual orientation I think it is extremely important because that is going to lead to how other kids perceive them and how they perceive themselves. And if they perceive that no one cares about [them]... they will be those

kids who aren't true to themselves until they are like in their mid-twenties and they're like, 'oh my God, I was gay that whole time and now I'm married with two kids.' And their like, 'oh, crap!' It's those people who didn't have acceptance at an early age who get to their mid-twenties to thirties who didn't realize who they are and that's a life that's gone by."

Teacher B echoed similar sentiments, stating: "I think it's highly important. I think they should have as much protection as anyone. And these days right now with situations, even more so, they need to feel like they can be open and free with what they believe and feel...they may be struggling with understanding what's going on with them, so I feel they should be protected and respected."

Teacher G replied: "I think at this age range, it is a time when students are learning about themselves and developing a sense of self-worth and developing their identity. I believe they should know from an early age that they will be protected, no matter who they are or how they feel inside."

Administrator A commented: "I think it's very important. I think it's important to protect all our students, but a lot of the LGBT kids, they feel out of place and obviously are not going to have as many friends. They are going to feel, I don't know, weaker to a certain extent."

Counselor A responded: "Very important. This time of their life is very formative years and the very beginning of them figuring out who they are. So, protecting them is very important to their self-esteem and their identity. It's something that will go with them throughout their life. It can really affect them for many years."

Parent A stated: “I think it’s very important. You want everybody to be accepted. You don’t want anybody to feel like they don’t belong just because of how they feel on the inside. The earlier that we can create a support network for these kids, then the more successful they will be in life.”

Parent D commented: “Well, I think that is a choice, and whatever their choice is, I believe we should be protective of that. I don’t think they should be separated in any way...because of their belief.”

Parent E expressed a different viewpoint by stating: “It’s not important at this age. Kids don’t choose to be that way until they are older... calling someone ‘sissy’ is just what kids do. They did it when my parents were kids and we did it when I was a kid.”

### **Effectiveness of the School’s Antibullying Policy**

In response to the question, *How would you describe the effectiveness of the anti-bullying policy at this school?* Only one of those interviewed responded that the current bullying policy at this school is very effective. Four stated that it wasn’t bad, but it could use some work, eight of them described it as ineffective, and two admitted they are not familiar with the bullying policy.

Teacher C expressed his concerns as follows: “If I get someone that I consider really, really bullying, I send them to [the office] and let them take care of it. What happens most time? Oh, they talk to them, give a note in their agenda and send them back to class. And that’s all that ever happens. So I don’t see a big bullying policy here.”

Teacher B echoed this sentiment by stating: “I feel like a lot of times the bullies in this school do not get the discipline or the consequences they deserve. I feel like a lot of times it’s not acknowledged and the kids are scared to come forward because they know nothing’s going to happen.”

Teacher D commented on the inconsistency of the current bullying policy by stating: “I think it could be better. I still don’t understand our consequences a lot. I think it’s sometimes one thing and sometimes it’s another.”

Teacher E explained her feelings by stating: “I think it’s weak. We are at a tough school. I think that the bullying programs should be geared to each school, because what is working at [the more affluent schools] is not near the same situations that we are dealing with at this school, and the bullying programs should be adapted to the environment. And we deal with some serious stuff here.”

Teacher G offered the following comments: “The bullying policy at this school is not stressed. Until there is a system that will actually get to the cause of the bullying, and educate students, then it will not be as effective as it needs to be.”

Counselor B stated: “We do have a...county board of education bullying, harassment, and intimidation policy. I think it’s effective if you have the correct procedures. I think that’s where we’re lacking...I don’t think it’s effective here because we don’t have the procedures to go along with the policy. So, whenever instances do come up, I think there’s confusion as to what to do. There might be a delayed response because we don’t know what to do. So, in that sense I think it could be more effective if we did something differently.”

Parent A stated: “I don’t think it’s effective at all. I think the kids that really are being bullied, they’re scared to tell anyone, or if they do tell someone, nothing happens as an end result.”

Parent C expressed concern for the bullying policy by stating: “...the definition that we have is pretty generic, and I feel like the guidance counselors deal with it the best they can, but I don’t feel like it’s very effective.”

Parent D had a different perception in stating: “I wouldn’t rate it high, and I wouldn’t rate it low. I think right now, we’re level with it, because I don’t think we put enough emphasis on some issues but I don’t think we completely ignore it either.”

Teacher A had a positive response: “I think we handle it well with the guidance department here. On a scale of 1 to 10, the effectiveness would be an 8. Because you have those kids who don’t say anything and internalize it and you can’t catch it, or you have those kids who constantly say they are bullied because someone looked at them.”

### **Support of new Programs in the School to Address the LGBT Bullying Issue**

In response to the question, *Would you be supportive of or opposed to programs in the school that would address this issue?* The majority of the participants stated they would be in favor of new programs that would address LGBT bullying.

Teacher D expressed support as follows: “I think if you address it early and take away any type of misnomer or shame from anything they might be feeling and pump up their confidence about who they are or who they may be or might become someday... you need to be prepared for middle school and be able to have the right words to say back to people. If you are teased in middle school, you need to be able to react to it in a way

that's productive and not lashing out...because it's something you have to deal with your whole life."

Teacher F stated similar feelings: "I think we have to teach tolerance because this is here to stay and it's not going to stop. If anything, it's going to increase so I'm all for a program that tells kids that we accept people for who they are. Even though they may come from parents who say 'those gays, they're terrible' we still have to take a stand at school."

Teacher B responded: "this is something I believe we need to be open to and I think we need to find a way to make a positive atmosphere, again, for them to feel safe and comfortable. We need to have something in place to make them feel like they are protected and they are secure, and maybe to even help them understand what they are going through or feeling."

Teacher C expressed support for an educational program by stating: "If they started something saying, 'hey, can we come into your room and talk about [LGBT issues]?' Let them come on in there 'cause it's spreading worldwide, and if the kids haven't seen same sex marriage on t.v...yet, they're going to. The older they get, it's going to spread and it's going to get worse. You know, it's going to be more and they've got to know what's going on. So, ok, let them come in the room and talk to the kids about it. Let them ask questions about it, I think that's the best thing that we could do. Just don't let me. I wouldn't know how to answer it, so let them as a trained professional."

Administrator A responded: "I, personally, would be very supportive. It's only going to become more common. I think that's a misconception a lot of people have. A

lot of people think that now that it's ok, that now everybody is trying to be gay, and what people don't realize is that maybe [those] people were always gay, but they were hiding it. But now that people...get to be more normal legally, [everyone] needs to be more aware and be more respectful. I think there definitely needs to be some informational type programs, and awareness."

Counselor B responded positively by stating: "I would support it 100%. It is so important to me that I advocate for my students no matter what their struggle is, whatever might be impeding their learning, it's my job to figure out how to better serve them and reduce that barrier to learning. So, I would support any program that's supposed to be advocating for our students feeling like they're part of an inclusive community."

Parent C stated: "I would be supportive of it if we saw a lot of it in our school. I know that middle schools are having an issue of it. If children are making that choice, then there needs to be some kind of class on it or program that addresses how we can see these different beliefs and we need to respect what they believe. A program to let them see that in real world society, people don't believe the same way and we've got to come to an understanding of that."

Parent A expressed support as follows: "I would definitely support it. I think the key to fixing this problem is to start getting kids to accept each other at a young age. Instead of waiting until middle or high school when their thoughts are already developed based on what their parents are thinking."

Counselor A could not promise support without specifics about the program: "If this were a high school or middle school I would be very supportive of that. For

elementary school, I would need to know a lot of details about the program. I would need more information to say if I would be supportive of that.”

Parent E expressed opposition to such programs by stating: “No. I don’t think they need to be telling my child what is right and wrong morally. They should get that from their parents and church, if they go.”

### **Potential Changes to the Current Bullying Policy**

In response to the question, *How might the school make changes to its current bullying policy to better protect LGBT students?* The majority of the participants responded that they believed some changes needed to be made to the current policy to better address the bullying issue at the school.

Teacher A responded: “Talk about it. Everyone wants to talk about ‘you don’t put your hands on someone’, but no one ever wants to talk about someone when they say ‘that’s gay’. You rarely hear that addressed, but that’s stereotyping the LGBT students as well, so talking about it is how you could change it.”

Teacher B explained: “I think there’s got to be something that can be put into place that can address this in a better manner. I have not been trained in that so I don’t know what, but there’s got to be something. ‘Cause it’s getting worse, and now you’ve got kids taking their own lives because they didn’t feel secure, they didn’t understand what they were going through, they didn’t know how to live and there was no one there to address it. They need to step it up and actually have consequences for the bully, and make it a more positive atmosphere for the person involved.”



Teacher D stated: “I would just think more teacher education. You need to have programs specifically for this type of issue, and be more of an advocate for them. Maybe just have some teachers, like a committee and if this comes up in your classroom and somebody doesn’t feel comfortable handling it, then say, ‘ok, well you need to go talk to Ms. Smith, she’s been trained.’, so you could even have specific teachers you could go to, not just the guidance department that would help you.

Teacher G responded: “They could write into the policy a sentence or statement that specifically lists the use of language that is anti-gay, or protection of students who don’t fit into a category that others see as ‘normal’, or heterosexual. The Guidance counselors could include in their classes, how everyone is to be respected, and how we are all different. Not just LGBT students, but include those in the lesson along with those of different races, religions, ages, sexes, abilities, looks, etc.”

Teacher C suggested adding verbiage into the current policy: “let them add in, ‘calling them these names is bullying.’ So let there be a policy that is part of the bullying policy that goes along with ‘ok, first offense, 2<sup>nd</sup> offense, 3<sup>rd</sup> offense.’”

Teacher G responded with a couple of suggestions: “They could write into the policy a sentence or statement that specifically lists the use of language that is anti-gay, or protection of students who don’t fit into a category that others see as ‘normal’, or heterosexual. The guidance counselors could include in their classes, how everyone is to be respected, and how we are all different. Not just LGBT students, but include those in the lesson along with those of different races, religions, ages, sexes, abilities, looks, etc.”

Administrator A explained: “The main thing we need to do is get it out [to the community]. The policy needs to be known. We need to have lessons.”

Counselor B proposed: “Take the policy and put some procedures in place so that your policy is effective, and you can do that in multiple ways... [One way] is like a form that everybody could use and be on the same page to fill out. The parent could be there, whether by phone call or in person, and we could fill it out with them so there’s no questions asked. It would determine if the incident fits all three parts of the definition of bullying. Is it repeated? Is there an imbalance of power? Is the person being mean on purpose? Once this is filled out, everybody’s on the same page, and then what do we do? What was the follow-up? So it kind of takes you through the steps that you need to take to follow up with the bully.”

Parent A agreed that “they need to make a clear definition as to what bullying is.”

Parent D echoed that sentiment as follows: “it needs to be clarified what bullying is. Things that students can and cannot say, whether through announcements in the morning or posters throughout the school. Just make everybody aware.”

Parent C suggested: “The guidance counselors could have classes on it, like they do with certain issues. I don’t know if that’s too young, or if they would have permission to do that, like teach about gay and lesbian, but they should.”

Counselor A had a different viewpoint by stating: “As far as I know, LGBT is not considered a protected class at this time, like as far as the way race, age, and ethnicity are by law. I guess the school doesn’t have a say in what the laws are. I am not sure if we

would have the power as a school or a school system to establish that as a protected class, but I think that would help if it was at least in writing that we will not tolerate any kind of harassment or name calling for this group of students. Sometimes just having something in writing helps.”

Parent E offered an opposing viewpoint: “I think it’s fine the way it is. I don’t think this needs to be addressed at this age. I mean, kids are going to joke around and call each other ‘gay’, we did it when I was young, it’s what kids do. That’s not bullying.”

### **Perceptions of Community Support**

In response to the question, *If you are supportive of a change in the school’s current policy, how difficult do you perceive it to be to get the community’s support of the change?* Twelve of the respondents perceived getting the community’s support to be difficult. Two of them felt it might be difficult, and only one participant did not think it would be difficult to get the community to support such changes. The majority of those who perceived it to be difficult mentioned the geographic location of the community and religion as reasons why it would be so.

Counselor A summarized this perception, when responding: “If we were going to have some sort of program about LGBT or try to raise awareness or educate students about that, I think we would definitely run into problems and I would not anticipate getting much support on that and I think many people would be against it. I think that has to do with being in Tennessee, and being in the South, and especially being in the ‘Bible Belt’. A lot of people have religious reasons and are passionate about not talking about those things.”

Teacher B expressed concern by stating: “This community? There are a lot of backward attitudes. I mean, we even still have racial issues here. So I think that this area and this school I do foresee it being a little more difficult probably just because of the situations that our children come from and the attitudes they’re hearing from their parents. But I think if they look at it as being in the best interest of the child, whatever they believe, if they’ll look at the child and want to help the child to adjust to their new lifestyle. They need to look at the benefits and not condemning. You know, it seems so often, these kinds of communities, they like to condemn, and they just have a more backwards attitude about it.”

Teacher C expressed similar perceptions: “In this area I think it would be [difficult], because I really feel [this area] is a very redneckish community, and I think... they would be very against it. Some of them wouldn’t, but I’d say more than half or three-quarters would be against it.”

Teacher D offered the following viewpoint along with a suggestion: “I’d say difficult unless you had a parent who could kind of take up the flag so to speak. As a parent, if I thought this was an issue in my family, I would say, ‘hey, I want to get involved’. It’s such a polarizing subject, I think that it would have to be handled where it was strictly like say, as far as the community, ‘if you feel like you and your family need this...this guidance or this advice, then you can come and we’ll have a meeting at school.’ I think that’s how you’d get the community involved; to invite them in and have a discussion.”

Teacher F responded: “just where we’re located and the socioeconomic demographics and just this community just seems like, they just seem redneck, you know, like not accepting of things they don’t agree with. And I can see a lot of them being anti-gay and really giving [the kids] a hard time, and if their own child tried to come out, I think they would be furious; that kind of parents.”

Administrator A perceived a more balanced response from the community: “The community here is iffy. I don’t think the community would support it. I think you’ll have some. But I don’t think you’ll have the majority support ever in this type of area. I think there’s literally opposition in everything we do, though. In the school system, honestly, they have to support it somewhat because it is protecting our students, all students, and that’s our job. So there has to be support. As far as community support, I think you’d get as much opposition as you would support at this point in time with LGBT in this area because it’s kind of redneck.”

Parent A expressed similar thoughts: “I’m not sure how difficult it would be. I would think it might be somewhat difficult because of geography and living in the South. People are not as open-minded here. You got Christians, and I keep thinking ‘rednecks’, but that’s what it is; People who have been raised to be prejudiced against other people for no reason.”

Parent B echoed these thoughts: “Very difficult. ‘Cause we’re in the Bible Belt and all the religion.”

Parent C stated: “Highly difficult. We are in a very conservative part of the country, we’re in the Bible Belt, and so people aren’t going to be supportive of policies that deal with LGBT stuff.”

Parent D perceived it would not be difficult and stated: “Every community is different based on living environment. But if a school puts a plan into play [and states] ‘hey we are going to support this, this is what we are doing’ and can convince the community, I don’t think it would be as difficult. I think it’s all in how they perceive it and how they communicate it.”

Parent E agreed that it would be difficult by stating: “This is a religious area, and people believe that lifestyle is wrong, and the school isn’t going to change their minds.”

### **How to Gain the Community’s Support**

In response to the question, *In what ways might the school approach gaining the support of the school community?* 11 of those interviewed agreed that the community’s support could be gained, and gave their ideas of how to do so. Two of them were not sure how to get their support, and two felt there is no reason to get the community’s support.

Of those who expressed ideas on how to gain the community’s support, a great majority mentioned the need to bring the community to the school to communicate and discuss it.

Teacher A responded: “I would start by pulling people together, doing some type of activity to pull them together...and actually [have] conversations.

Teacher B echoed this sentiment by stating: “have a community meeting or something to address it and then move to the students, because if you don’t get [the parents] on board, then the kids will just copy whatever their parents say.”

Teacher E suggested, “letting it be known to some parents that there are things available, support available, places to go. At first, a support group that meets on Thursday evenings for parents and kids cause sometimes things grow.”

Teacher F suggested finding “a good spokesperson who would talk to the community” and explain the need for such a change.

Teacher G suggested “talking with parents and teachers to get a feel for who might be receptive to such a change. Then targeting those individuals to be a part of a committee, whose goal is to gain the support of the whole community.”

Parent D suggested, “bringing them in and showing a Power Point. Saying ‘these are our beliefs and this is where we are going, this is why we believe this’.”

Most of those who suggested ways to gain the community’s support agreed that any attempt needs to start small.

Teacher B stated, “It would have to be baby steps. Whatever is put into place, it would have to be baby steps.”

Teacher D agreed by stating, “I think small outreach groups are really good for schools...kind of like a mini support group for parents.”

Teacher E concurred by responding, “I don’t think that offering it to everyone, making it mandatory for everyone is a good approach. I think maybe letting it be known

to some parents that there are things available, support available. If parents knew there was a support group they could go to, even if it helped one person, it would be worth it.”

Parent B stated, “I think you have to break it down and do it one person at a time.”

### **Summary**

This research project, using a qualitative instrumental case study, sought to gain an understanding of how adult community members in a Middle Tennessee school perceive the issue of LGBT-based bullying, harassment, and violence and how the school’s anti-bullying policy applies to LGBT students. Fifteen adult members of the school community served as study participants, and data were collected from each participant through personal interviews. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

In order to ensure validity and transferability, the data were triangulated by comparing the information obtained through teacher interviews with information obtained from counselor, parent, and administrator interviews to identify commonalities. Another method used to ensure credibility was member checking. Confidentiality of the participants was protected by encoding the identities of each and storing all information in a locked safe. Walden University’s Internal Review Board reviewed the proposal and addressed any ethical issues and protected the rights of the participants.

### **Cross-Cutting Themes**

The following four themes emerged from the data collected from the participants answering these questions that revolve around implementing a change in the school



policy (see figure 1). (a) Accepting culture, (b) protection of students, (c) need for change, and (d) process for change.

**Accepting culture.** The culture of MTS is perceived to be one that is accepting of all students. This is evidenced by ten participants in the study stating they believe that all teachers are accepting of these students. One believed that some teachers are accepting, and one believed that teachers are not accepting of non-heteronormative students at this age. Three participants did not have enough knowledge of the school culture to form a definite opinion, or weren't sure one way or the other.

**Protection of students.** Fourteen of the fifteen participants reported that they thought it is important to protect all students from bullying. One participant disagreed because of the age of the students at the school.

Only one of those interviewed responded that the current bullying policy at this school is very effective in protecting students from bullying. Four stated that it wasn't bad, but it could use some work, eight of them described it as ineffective, and two admitted they are not familiar with the bullying policy.

**Need for change.** Twelve of those interviewed agreed that some changes are needed and made suggestions. Two of them perceived that nothing additional needs to be done. One responded that they were not sure what, if anything should be done to change the current school policy

Fourteen of the respondents agreed that they would support programs in the school that would address this issue, although two stated that their support would depend on the details of the program. One parent expressed opposition to such a program.

Of those who supported a change, some suggested redefining the bullying policy and making it clear to the stakeholders what constitutes bullying. Others suggested educating the teachers through professional development classes to prepare them to address LGBT bullying when they observe it or it is reported to them. A common suggestion was to communicate, have discussions, and just talk about it to everyone involved. An addition to the counseling curriculum was also suggested as a way to educate the students to be more accepting of the LGBT community.

**Process for change.** Of those participants who gave suggestions of how to proceed with changing the current status, a large majority of them recommended getting the community's support. They believed this could best be accomplished by having meetings with all the stakeholders and open the topic up for discussion in order to educate and offer support. Most of the respondents were in agreement that any attempts at meeting with the community regarding this issue should be done in small groups at first in order to gradually gain support of the changes and to offer support to those families who are directly affected by LGBT bullying and discrimination.

### **Data Comparisons**

There were some discrepancies in the perceptions of teachers as opposed to those of counselors and those of parents. Teachers were overwhelmingly in favor of protecting all students, no matter the issues. The majority of them were also in favor of revising the current bullying policy to include protection of LGBT students and to make the policy more effective. The counselors were also in favor of protecting and advocating for all students, however, they were split in whether action should be taken at the elementary

level. Parents' responses indicated some hesitancy in regards to protecting LGBT students at an elementary school. The parents were also not as knowledgeable about the current bullying policy. Some parents were even opposed to any changes to the policy and curriculum that would support LGBT issues.

Data collected from the participants revealed that the majority perceive the culture of the school to be accepting towards students who are or are perceived to be LGBT, although they did not believe the current bullying policy to be very effective. The majority also felt it is important to protect LGBT students from bullying and would be supportive of a change in the current policy. The changes suggested by most of the respondents were to write it into the school's anti-bullying policy, and to have an action plan such as a program to present to the students as well as communication to all people involved.

Teachers	Counselors	Parents
School culture is accepting toward LGBT students, but the current school policy is not effective.	School culture is mostly accepting toward LGBT students, and the current school policy is effective, but could use some help.	School culture is not as tolerant toward LGBT, but most do not believe this to be an issue at this age. Most are not familiar with the current bullying policy.
Very important to protect LGBT students. All support a change in the current policy.	Very important to protect LGBT students. Split on whether they would support a change in the policy at this level.	Split on the importance of protecting LGBT students. Most support a change in the current policy, one did not support a change.
Change the verbiage of the current policy to specify LGBT related bullying. Add to the guidance curriculum to educate students about the issue.	One suggested changing procedures in how to deal with bullying instances. The other believes that nothing can be done because LGBT is not a legally protected class.	Most suggested a change in the written policy to specify LGBT related bullying. One had no idea as to what to do. A couple suggested changing the guidance curriculum.
Invite small groups into the school to discuss and begin obtaining support of the change.	Building relationships with teachers is important. It would have to come down from the State government.	Bring parents into the school in small groups. Present proposed change and explain the reasoning.

*Figure 1.* Participant-specific themes.

A plan of action emerged from the results of this study that proactively addresses the issue of protecting LGBT students from bullying, harassment, and violence in the school. The project, which is defined in detail in Section 3, will initiate a plan of action that will communicate to and educate the school community on the issue of elementary aged LGBT students and progress into a revision of the school bullying policy and procedures.

## Section 3: The Project

### **Introduction**

This qualitative case study explored the perceptions of adult community members in a Middle Tennessee elementary school regarding issues of LGBT-based bullying, harassment, and violence and how the school's anti-bullying policy applies to LGBT students. The study involved an analysis of interviews with teachers, counselors, administration, and parents of children who attend the school. Data collected from these interviews indicated that the majority believe that protecting LGBT students from this type of bullying, harassment, and violence is important, however, they also do not feel that the school is currently doing an adequate job of protecting students who are, or are perceived to be LGBT. The data also showed that the majority would support a change in the school's policy, but they also feel it would be difficult to get all the parents on board with the change, due to the geographic location and strong religious beliefs in this community. The proposed project is a policy recommendation that will ultimately get the community's support, add specific verbiage to the current bullying policy to address LGBT-specific bullying, harassment, and violence, as well as adding LGBT-related material to the guidance counseling class curriculum.

### **Description and Goals**

As mentioned in Section 1, this case study addressed LGBT-based bullying, harassment, and violence, which is a national problem that is also of concern in the state of Tennessee, where the local community under study is located. Qualitative interviews with adult members of an elementary school community provided data that indicated

there is a need to change the current school policy and curriculum to address the issue of LGBT bullying. Given the issue is of concern before children reach their teen years in that children's inability to conform to the heteronormative environment accounts for a large part of the mistreatment they experience before the age of 12 (Roberts, Austin, Corliss, Vander Morris, & Koenen, 2010). The data also indicated that gaining the community support, although perceived to be a difficult task, is necessary.

Three central goals informed the development of this project. The first goal, as identified by the majority of the participants in the study was to gain the support of the parents in the school community by first inviting small groups in to present and discuss the issue of LGBT-based bullying, harassment, and violence at an elementary school level. The second goal was to make a change in verbiage to the current school bullying policy to specify LGBT-based bullying, harassment, and violence. The third goal was for the counselors to add to their classroom curriculum lessons on diversity including LGBT children. Taking these goals into consideration, a plan will be developed to work with the school in communicating with the community to discuss changing the current school bullying policy and counseling curriculum.

### **Rationale**

Data from this study collected from the interviews revealed that the majority of the adult members of the school community perceived a need and a desire for a change in the current school bullying policy regarding specifically protecting LGBT students. "Given the strong connection between bullying, prejudice, and discrimination, there is a need for such programs to place greater emphasis on [LGBT] issues. (Poteat & Russell,

2013, p. 267). Several participants suggested such a change should be put into writing in the bullying policy in order to be consistent throughout the school. Writing a change into the current bullying policy would ensure that all teachers and parents would be aware of the school's stance on this type of bullying.

When questioned about possible changes that could be made, the majority suggested a change to the guidance curriculum to include lessons on acceptance and tolerance of LGBT people. Poteat and Russell (2013) echoed this sentiment by stating, "There is also a need for inclusive curriculum that represents LGBT issues and individuals (p. 268). Smith and Payne (2015) argued that "destabilizing the gender binary and teaching children (and adults) about gender diversity would contribute to creating a school culture that is inclusive of all gender identities and expressions and decrease peer-to-peer, gender-based aggression (p.45). Adding the category of LGBT into the school counselors' lessons on diversity would begin the education process and generate a greater understanding at earlier ages, thus creating a more accepting, tolerant, and supportive population of adults in the years to come.

The majority of participants also expressed the need to obtain the support of parents, although most all of the participants indicated that they perceived it will be difficult to get the parents to support such a change due to the geographic location of the school community and the strong religious foundation of the community. When asked how they might suggest the school get the support of the parents, the majority responded that it should start with inviting small groups into the school to present the proposed changes and to start a dialogue regarding the issues at hand. Hardy and Grootenboer

(2016) suggested that “responsive, agentic actions, dialogue and relationship-building [help] encourage more productive individual and collective schooling practices to become established (p.36). Starting a dialogue with the parents in small groups will also begin educating the adult members of the community and hopefully acquire an understanding and tolerance, if not a change of heart. Malins (2016) stated that “the responsibility to address diverse gender and sexual identities does not rest with the teachers alone; a network of support... must be present to create a positive school climate (p.136).

Based on the responses of the participants in this case study and supported by literature, a policy recommendation is needed that would (a) change the verbiage of the current bullying policy to include anti-LGBT bullying, (b) alter the counseling curriculum to include tolerance and a greater understanding of LGBT people, and (c) assemble the school community together in order to educate and dialogue with them about the proposed changes.

### **Review of the Literature**

As the data collected from the interviews discussed in Section 2 indicated, there is a need to protect students at an elementary school level who are, or are perceived to be, LGBT. The data indicated that not only writing it into the bullying policy, but actively teaching tolerance to the students is desired. It also suggests that getting parents to support such changes is necessary; however, it will be difficult. This change in policy and procedure was developed using data collected in this study as well as information obtained in a review of literature. A search of literature was conducted using the



following terms – *curriculum changes, LGBT elementary, LGBT curriculum, diversity education, gaining parental support, changing school policy, and community support*. The searches were conducted using Google Scholar and Walden University Discover Service.

Given the study's themes related to perceptions of school culture, policy, practice, and community in promoting the safety and well-being of LGBT students who are in elementary school, this literature review covers several direct and indirect resources. The need for protection of LGBT students in an elementary school, community support, sexual orientation curriculum, policy and practice, and barriers to changes were all subject to review.

**Teaching Diversity in Elementary Schools.** When proposing to address the safety and protection of LGBT students, there is often resistance from the community, especially when addressing the issue in an elementary school setting, but it is becoming more evident that children are not as innocent and naïve about sexuality as adults like to think, but they are overwhelmed with images and words that promote normative gender expectations from them (Smith & Payne, 2016).

As addressed in section 1, because children are continually discovering themselves from infancy to adulthood, there is a need for a positive and supportive environment in elementary schools for students who do not conform to traditional gender norms. Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar (2013) concluded in their study of how an urban public elementary school teacher added discussions of diversity and gender-nonconforming people to her curriculum and how the students responded, that children

are ready to learn about gender diversity in elementary schools and that carefully planned lessons can be taught appropriately and effectively over time.

Teaching children acceptance of diversity can help counter-act the negative effects of a heteronormative environment, such as limiting a child's preferred interests and activities and creating an atmosphere of fear and violence. In so doing, "children may be more likely to pursue individual interests and identities without facing fear and oppression...The earlier this process begins, the more opportunities there are to intervene and decrease developing violence and aggression (Malins, 2016, p.137).

Payne and Smith (2014), in their research of educators' responses to the news that a transgender child would be attending their elementary schools, found that creating an accepting environment for LGBT children in elementary schools is an ideal way for the schools to look at themselves and see how dependent they are on the gender binary. This reliance on heteronormativity is conducive to fear of anyone who does not fit that norm, and such fears hinder educators' ability to support LGBT students, thus providing an inequitable education for them.

In the current study, some participants described instances in which they have observed non-gender normative behavior in elementary school aged children. Teacher A stated: "a boy in my class told me he feels like he is a girl trapped in a boy's body." Teacher E commented: "I know for a fact that we had a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade boy who very much you can tell wants to be one of the girls." Administrator A stated that "there's a first grader now, who shaves her head...really short hair and even wears boys' underwear, you can see are Mutant Ninja Turtles when she bends over and her pants ride down a bit."

These accounts from school community members demonstrate that non-traditional gender roles are being expressed in children at a very young age, which would justify a change in the current bullying policy and the school counselors' classroom curriculum on diversity.

### **Policy and Practice**

The fact that many LGBT youth experience school-based bullying, harassment, and violence highlights the need for this issue to be addressed in school policy and in practice (Poteat & Russell, 2013). In their study of bullying behaviors and how educators react to them when the victims are LGBT, Perez, Schanding, and Dao concluded there is a need for ongoing bullying training, especially as it relates to youth who identify as LGBT (2013). LGBT students are better equipped to navigate successfully through their school years when supported by educators and anti-harassment policies (Beck, 2015). However, changes in written policy are not enough to adequately protect the LGBT students. Smith and Payne (2016) stated:

Policy implementation strategies that focus on minimum standards of safety and inclusion rarely stimulate conversations about recognizing and valuing differences. In the case of accommodating transgender youth, new policies are not necessarily leading to recognition of the myriad examples of gender fluidity or gender nonconformity that have been present in schools all along. (p.35)

In their study of the experiences and results of teaching students about gender diversity in an elementary school classroom, Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar (2013) supported

such practice in the curriculum because it taught the students to question restrictive social systems, and think more inclusively regarding gender expression.

School counselors are uniquely qualified to help improve the school climate towards LGBT students because they are trained to focus on the whole student, academically as well as psychosocially (Jennings, 2014). One way that counselors can demonstrate their commitment to advocating for all students is by using their school webpages. School counselors can use their websites to post statements of nondiscrimination or include more content on diversity (Kennedy & Baker, 2014/2015).

In the current study, many participants agreed that the issue should be addressed in the classroom, either by a guidance counselor, or a guest speaker who is trained on the subject. Counselor B suggested the following: “I think creating a school-wide program that addresses a ‘safe place’ for students to grow and learn would be the approach I would take...our goal would be to teach respectful words and define words like ‘prejudice’, ‘bias’, and some of those other key words that come up when discussing LGBT.”

### **Cultivating Community**

In order to adequately address the multifaceted needs of LGBT students, it is necessary for school counselors to collaborate with all educational stakeholders, including administration and parents (Beck, 2015). School counselors should look for opportunities to create community partnerships in bullying prevention work, which could ultimately shift the school climate and promote a positive change in the school environment (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013). Schools are not able to tackle and solve

complex social problems without utilizing resources and support from the school community (Skovdal & Campbell, 2015).

In order to get the support of the community, it is crucial for the professional practitioner to build a good, positive relationship with parents (Owen & Anderson, 2015). By bringing in families and getting their support, the students, teachers, and staff all benefit (Warren et al., 2011). Parental involvement and support positively affects students' behavior, improves their social skills, and can aid in creating a successful democratic school community (Haines et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2011 ; Warren et al., 2011).

In the current study, when asked how the school might gain the support of the parents, many of the participants suggested starting small, bringing in small groups of parents and opening up a dialogue about the issues. Teacher A stated: "a gathering of all those in support and you could have where people talk about it and stuff like that." Teacher D suggested: "small outreach groups...everybody has an issue with their child they could use help with." Teacher E echoed that sentiment by stating: "I don't think that offering it to everyone, making it mandatory for everyone is a good approach... letting it be known to some parents that there are things available, support available." Counselor B responded: "relationship building with your teachers is very important...parent communication is important." Parent D suggested, "bringing them in, showing a Power Point. Saying that these are our beliefs and this is where we are going, this is why we believe this." The sentiments of the participants is supported by Hardy and Grootenboer (2016) when they studied the advocacy for the community partnerships

program of the Southern Cross school community. They concluded that the community did not just come together spontaneously, but through specific actions, dialogue and relationship-building.

## **Project Description**

### **Introduction**

With the approval of the project study from Walden University, the policy recommendation will be submitted to the principal of MTS elementary school. If approved by the principal, the project could be presented to the guidance counselors and behavior committee to organize the implementation. Information on potential resources and existing supports, potential barriers, the proposal for implementation and timetable, and roles and responsibilities of those involved is included below.

### **Potential Resources and Existing Supports**

Implementing such a change in school policy, practice and getting the school community on board, requires stakeholder support as well as some financial support. Given the school's history of recruiting faculty members to volunteer to serve on committees, and having interviewed both school counselors on this topic, forming a committee to oversee the implementation of this project should not be difficult. Additional community support could be obtained by contacting the local chapter of GLSEN for literature and people to speak on the issue. Some money from the school's general fund could be used to purchase refreshments for parent meetings, and also to purchase literature for use in the counseling classrooms.

### **Potential Barriers**

The most significant barrier to the implementation of this project will be reaching parents who are willing to attend a meeting at the school concerning this issue. Parental involvement after school hours has historically been limited to a small percentage of the population. Another reason for this potential barrier is the religious beliefs of the majority of the school community. There are approximately 38 churches within a five mile radius of MTS Elementary School. Most all of the participants in this study mentioned that religion would be a reason for the difficulty of getting community support on this issue. The school is located in Tennessee, which is commonly known to be in the “Bible Belt” of America, and in recent weeks, the Tennessee State Legislature passed a bill naming the Holy Bible as the Official State Book of Tennessee. The Bill was vetoed by the governor of Tennessee in April of 2016. This action is indicative of the highly religious and conservative values of many citizens in Tennessee.

### **Addressing Barriers**

Participants in the current study expressed concern that getting the parents’ support for changes to the current school policy that would protect LGBT students would be very difficult due to geographic location and religious beliefs. Teacher B stated that “this area and this school I do foresee it being more difficult probably just because of the situations that our children come from and the attitudes they’re hearing from their parents.” Teacher G added, “Although I think there are some members of the community who would be very supportive, I think the majority of people would not want the issue addressed in school. I think they feel that is a religious issue, and not a social issue.”

Parent E agreed by stating, “This is a religious area, and people believe that lifestyle is wrong, and the school isn’t going to change their minds.” These sentiments were echoed by Beck (2016) when he stated “barriers such as the imposition of parent and community religious values to implementing LGBT resources...can also create ambivalence and challenge for principals” (p. 7).

### **Prevention of LGBT Bullying**

In an effort to create safe and supportive environments for all students, schools should take action to develop a supportive climate for students who do not conform to traditional gender norms, and to intervene and prevent the bullying, harassment, and violence against their LGBT students (Saewyc, Konishi, Rose, & Homma, 2014; Swearer et al., 2008). One way this can be achieved is for teachers to actively and openly support the LGBT students by taking action when they are aware of such instances occurring (DeLara, 2012; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). Teachers can participate in trainings in order to become more self-aware of their own feelings about homosexuality and homosexuals as well as increasing their personal comfort level in relation to LGBT issues (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, & Watson, 2009;). Schools can also support the organization of gay-straight alliances (GSA), which are student led clubs that provide a safe place for LGBT students and their friends (Graybill et al., 2009). The presence of a GSA can help create a safer, more supportive climate which lowers the risk of alienation, depression, and suicidal ideation (Saewyc et al., 2014). A GSA can provide intergroup dialogues which may, in turn, decrease stereotypes, teacher prejudice against LGBT students and parents and increase trust, development of positive



relationships, and promote respect for diversity (Gerouki, 2010; Dessel, 2010). The most effective way to reduce and/or stop bullying is to implement prevention and intervention programs that target entire community, including the individual, school, family, religion, and surrounding community in which the bullying exists (Swearer et al., 2010).

### **Proposal for Implementation and Timetable**

Upon approval of the project study by Walden University, the first step in implementation would require obtaining approval from the principal of MTS Elementary School. If approved by the principal, the project could be presented to the guidance counselors and behavior committee to organize the implementation. Then, as early as July, 2016, contact would be made via email recruiting faculty members to volunteer to serve on a committee to oversee the implementation of this project. Once the committee has met, contact would be made to the local chapter of GLSEN to elicit advice and resources to be used in community meetings. Within the first four weeks of school starting in August of 2016, the committee would begin reaching out to the community to get parents to attend the first meeting. A written change to the current bullying policy as well as an addition to the counseling curriculum would be discussed with the community and could be implemented as early as the end of the first 9 weeks of school.

### **Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others**

My role will be to oversee the implementation of this three step process in order to gain community support, change the written bullying policy of the school to specifically address protection of LGBT students, and begin including LGBT in the counseling classroom curriculum on diversity. Upon approval by the principal, I will

assume my role as coordinator and begin contacting faculty members to get a committee formed. Next, I will contact the local chapter of GLSEN to arrange for someone to come speak to the committee. I will serve as the liaison between the committee, the school administration and counselors, and GLSEN.

Once the committee is formed, it will be their role to organize and schedule a community meeting to bring parents into the discussion. The committee will also determine how many meetings to schedule, as well as who and how many to invite to the initial meeting, and any subsequent meetings.

Adding the new verbiage to the written school policy will be the result of a collaborative effort of the committee and the school counselors, and will require a final approval from the school administrators. Upon approval, the administrator would need to provide support for hosting community meetings and communicating the dates and times of the meetings to those who are interested in attending the meetings.

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

The outcome of this project study is a school-wide project that has three overarching objectives, which are: (a) to gain the support of the school community, (b) to add verbiage to the existing school bullying policy that includes specific protection of LGBT students, and (c) to add resources to the counseling classroom curriculum that include the LGBT population in lessons regarding diversity.

To assess the overall success of this project, a goal-based evaluation will be implemented. The goals have been identified, and the determination of whether they have been attained will be accomplished in the following manner: (a) a majority of the

parents who attend the discussion meetings indicate they are supportive of the proposed changes in policy and counseling curriculum, (b) the school bullying policy is changed to specify an intolerance of bullying, harassment, or violence that is anti-LGBT, and (c) counseling classes on diversity include resources and discussions concerning the LGBT population.

Key stakeholders include Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, support staff, counselors, administration, as well as parents of children who attend the school.

Evidence of parental support will be evident in anonymous surveys for those who attend the meetings at the school. Because the population of an elementary school changes with each new school year, parent meetings will be held at the beginning of each year to inform and discuss the school policy and practice in regards to the issue of protecting LGBT students.

### **Implications Including Social Change**

#### **Local Community**

This project study explored the perceptions of adult members of the school community regarding the bullying of LGBT students and to gain a better understanding of the barriers that are keeping LGBT students from feeling safe in school. The outcome of this analysis is a three-part project that gains the support of the majority of parents, changes the current bullying policy, and adds LGBT to the categories discussed in diversity lessons. The goals of the project were informed by the data collected and a related literature review. The promotion of the project will be aided by the local chapter of GLSEN.

The faculty who volunteer to be on the committee as well as the parents who attend the informational meetings will increase their knowledge and gain a better understanding of the plight of LGBT students of all ages. The students in the school will gain an understanding of and learn the importance of respect and tolerance of people in the LGBT community by using the resources in the counseling class lessons on diversity.

### **Far-Reaching**

Children are continually forming their own identities from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and they are continually subjected to the cultural prejudices and forced heteronormativity of their peers and families. Yet, it is rare to find policies or practices in elementary schools that address, much less support and protect LGBT students. Given the recent trend in some southern states to pass laws that arguably discriminate against LGBT persons and the public debate that has ensued, this project has the potential to educate the local school community and create an understanding of the LGBT community, which in turn could eventually lead to a greater understanding and acceptance of the LGBT community by the district, state, and southeast region of the United States.

This project, by educating the school community and obtaining their support through open discussions and sharing of personal experiences of LGBT students, has the potential to reach to the surrounding communities in the district. By including verbiage that specifically protects students from anti-LGBT bullying, harassment, and violence, this project can be the role model for other elementary schools to follow. A successful

attempt to gain the support of one school community has a greater chance of spreading to other communities and eventually to the state level.

### **Conclusion**

Formed in response to, and enlightened by data obtained from adult members of an elementary school community in rural Tennessee, this policy recommendation and action plan will help to connect anti-LGBT bullying research with the policy and practice of the school. Surrounding this qualitative case study's conceptual framework of anti-bias education, this project will help create an environment of positive self-identity for every student by providing educators with the knowledge and support they need to more effectively guide and protect all students in the school. It is through this form of anti-bias education, the students will learn more about the LGBT population and gain an understanding and acceptance of their differences, which will extend into their middle and high school years and decrease the amount of bullying, harassment, and violence perpetrated against LGBT students and youth. Goal-based evaluations will be conducted to determine if the project actually achieved the support of the majority of parents in the school community, if a change was written into the school bullying policy, and if LGBT-specific resources were included in the counselors' lessons on diversity.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

The following reflections provide insight into the process of researching a societal problem, identifying a need, collecting data, and developing a project to address the initial problem. This section offers me the opportunity to reflect on this educational journey and learn from my thought processes and hopefully discover ways to continue this work.

### **Project Strengths and Limitations**

This project was developed as a result of data obtained from personal interviews of adult members of the school community, so, one of this project's strengths is that it is relevant to the participants of the study as well as all the members of the school community. The focus of this study was on the bullying of LGBT youth and children of elementary school age and is supported by anti-bias education theory, therefore it is theoretically sound. Collecting data from adult members of the school community through interviews helped to provide helpful information about the needs and desires of this school. The data also provided information on potential barriers to addressing the problem within the school community. Following the collection and analysis of this data, a project was designed to face the barriers and promote change in school policy and practice, ultimately providing a safe environment for all students.

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

A limitation of this study would be whether the results may actually be generalizable to the entire population of teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents

of children who are attending this school. A recommendation may be made that future research include quantitative or mixed methods study that doesn't include personal interviews.

Another limitation of this study, considering the emotional nature and recent national attention given this topic, is the possibility that the majority of people who agreed to participate in the study were supportive of the topic. Although, there were some data collected that were not in support of any changes to school policy or special protection of LGBT students, the majority of participants were sympathetic to the LGBT community to some extent. Future research should strive to use a method that is even more confidential, or if possible, anonymous to get a more accurate reading of the school community.

A limitation of the proposed project is the uncertainty of whether the initial small group meetings with parents will actually result in gaining their support. This project is built on the assumption that the majority of the parents will support the changes to be implemented. Future research and related projects might focus on the cultivation of school community support, and develop an evaluation system that can accurately measure success.

### **Scholarship**

In the process of earning my Master's degree nine years ago, I took an educational research class which involved writing a 30-page research paper. At the end of the term, the professor took me aside and encouraged me to continue on to get a doctorate. I had mixed reactions to his suggestion. I was flattered that he thought I had

the potential to accomplish such a feat, but part of me thought, “There’s no way” because I did not enjoy any part of that class or writing that paper. However, a few years later, when I entered the doctoral program at Walden University, I immediately began thinking about what topic I would choose for my research project. For the first two years, I had a topic in mind that I had chosen based on my career and personal experiences and attitudes of other teachers on the subject. All the papers I wrote were focused toward the topic of standardized assessment. Although I was interested in that topic and it directly affected me as a teacher, I ended up switching topics when it actually came time to begin my project study. That decision to change topics taught me the importance of choosing something that one is passionate about. All the hours of research, reading, and writing were worth it because I kept in mind how this might actually be of help to LGBT students one day. This was the most important lesson I learned regarding scholarship.

### **Project Development**

This project, obtaining the support of the school community to change the policy and practice of the school in protecting LGBT students from bullying, harassment, and violence, was developed from the review of relevant literature that identified the problem of LGBT students being bullied in school and the long term effects it was having on them as well as interviews that identified potential barriers to correcting the problem. The lesson I learned about project development during this process was the importance of listening to those who are closest to the problem and to let their responses guide the project development; for, it is the experiences and perceptions of those people that will provide insight as to the possible solution. I also learned that for a project to be



effective, it does not have to be complicated. There can be relatively simple solutions to a problem that just need someone to implement them.

### **Leadership and Change**

During this process, much thought and attention has been given to educational leadership. I have had the opportunity to not only read and view videos regarding leadership in the educational community, but to apply that information to my role as a grade level team leader at the school where I teach. I've learned that a great part of leadership is listening to what everyone has to say, respecting their thoughts and opinions, and stepping back and empowering others to lead as well.

An integral part of educational leadership is to recognize and to be receptive to necessary changes. I have learned that to successfully effect change, it is important to get the buy-in of all the stakeholders. Mandating changes without considering the ones that are directly affected by the change is not effective, in itself. It is by clearly explaining why you feel a need for change and, again, listening to the thoughts and suggestions of those directly affected by the change that the changes will be successful.

### **Reflection on the Importance of the Work**

#### **Analysis of Self as Scholar-Practitioner**

Until I began this journey at Walden University, I never really thought of myself as a scholar. I, of course, had written research papers on assigned topics for classes throughout my educational career, but I limited my thoughts of scholarship to those assignments. I have discovered through this journey that scholarship can be practiced outside of the classroom setting, as long as I am delving deeper for information on a topic

of interest. I tend to do this in creating lesson plans for my 4<sup>th</sup> grade students, not to the extent of this project study, but I play the part of a scholar, nonetheless. I have also learned through this doctoral process, that persistence pays off, and that if there is passion, there is motivation to find out as much as you can about anything.

### **Analysis of Self as Project Developer**

My experience in designing and implementing programs and projects has been limited up to this point in my life. I have had the opportunity to serve on committees at school and to give an opinion or a suggestion or two on occasion. However, this journey has given me more confidence that I am capable of identifying a need, developing a plan to meet that need, and implementing that plan, or at least overseeing the implementation of that plan. As a practitioner, it is important to incorporate the characteristics of a good leader in successfully implementing a project. During this project study, I have discovered that once you come up with an idea, those plans can change throughout the development process, and it is important to step back and consider the possible outcomes and make necessary changes before the implementation.

### **The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change**

The rights of LGBT citizens have been making headlines in recent months, and reactions to court rulings have sparked heated debates throughout the nation. A court clerk in Kentucky received national attention when she was arrested for refusing to issue marriage licenses to LGBT couples. There have been lawsuits against owners of bakeries who have refused to make wedding cakes for LGBT couples. In May of 2016, the Tennessee legislature passed a bill that would make The Bible the official book of the

state. This was, arguably, a backlash against the state acknowledging same sex marriages, although the governor vetoed the bill. Most recently, in the Spring of 2016, the state of North Carolina has made national headlines by passing a law requiring transgender people to use the restroom that matches the gender listed on their birth certificate. The amount of resistance to equal rights for LGBT people indicates the prevalence of intolerance around the country, but mostly in southern states. This is indicative of a lack of education and understanding on their part. This intolerance is passed down to their children and has been manifesting itself within the schools. LGBT-based bullying has been getting greater attention in recent years, resulting in much literature being published on the subject. Such bullying has resulted in children and youth feeling isolated, hopeless, and even taking their own lives.

The data from this study illustrated the desire of educators and some parents to protect students who are, or are perceived to be LGBT from such bullying in schools. The data also revealed that elementary educators feel strongly about protecting all students, and that it is also important to get the parents support in order to address the issue of LGBT bullying in the school. Informed by two literature reviews and data collected from adult members of an elementary school community, this study resulted in a project aimed at gaining the support of parents, changing the school bullying policy, and adding LGBT resources to the counseling class curriculum on diversity. With the ongoing goal-based evaluations, this project will continually grow and develop with each new year to become increasingly effective in protecting LGBT students by promoting acceptance and tolerance. The information gained in this study, when published, may

possibly provide helpful information to others who are seeking to make changes to existing policies and procedures to better protect all students everywhere.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

Thousands of students are experiencing anti-LGBT bullying, harassment, and violence throughout elementary, middle, and high schools across the country. The negative affect that such bullying has on those students, range from lower academic performance in school to tragic instances of suicide. The data from this study illustrate that educators are not only aware of a need to protect LGBT students in elementary schools, but they are open to changes in policy and practice in order to achieve that goal. This study promotes open dialogue with members of school communities to address the issues and needs of LGBT students and to gain support of necessary changes in school policy and practice. The present study took place in a rural school community in Tennessee, known for its strong religious presence and conservative values. However, the majority of the participants in this study supported being proactive in getting community support and changing school policy and practice regarding LGBT bullying. Additional research, in other southern states could action research to evaluate the effectiveness of this project in protecting LGBT students from bullying, harassment, or violence.

### **Conclusion**

This critical reflection of my journey through the doctoral process has provided me a chance to see how differently I view myself as a scholar, practitioner, leader, and project developer. I have also taken a close look at this study to see the true potential it

has to affect positive social change in elementary schools throughout the country as well as to aid in future research on LGBT bullying in elementary schools and overcoming the barriers to preventing it.

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### Appendix A: Policy Recommendation

**Policy Recommendation:** Present to the MTS school community a plan for making changes to the policy and procedures at the school in order to provide a safe environment for all students, including those who are LGBT.

**Obtain approval of school administration** - After receiving final project approval from Walden University, I will schedule a meeting with the school administration in July to propose the following:

There is a dearth of research and information regarding the effects of bullying, harassment, and violence against children and youth. The research also shows that bullying against LGBT children and youth have greater negative effects than bullying that is aimed at their heterosexual peers. These effects include, but are not limited to an increase in school absences, which negatively influences academic performance, lower self-esteem, depression, and an alarming rate of suicide attempts. While research has found that children are already discovering their self-identity as early as kindergarten age, there is little understanding by parents, teachers, and school administrators of the importance of creating a positive, safe environment for LGBT students from Kindergarten through high school. As a result of this research, I would like to recommend a policy and procedure change for the school. This would be a multi-step project that includes educating and gaining the support of the school community to advocate for those students who are LGBT, perceived to be LGBT, or have LGBT parents.

- I. Organize a committee-** I will meet with the school counselors to discuss the formation of a committee whose purpose is to (a) communicate with the school community regarding the changes in school policy and procedure, (b) write an amendment to the current school bullying policy that specifically protects LGBT students from being bullied, and (c) find LGBT resources to add to the counseling class lessons on diversity that are appropriate for elementary school students. The school counselors, via school email, will recruit faculty and staff who are interested in volunteering to be on this committee.
- II. Gather resources-** The committee will reach out to the community for resources to use when presenting the policy changes to the school community. I will be available and willing to share the results of this research study with them. Other possible resources would be the local chapter of GLSEN, the Nashville chapter of the Human Rights Commission, and local high schools who have Gay Student Alliances in place.
- III. Community Meeting:** The committee will begin to plan the first in several community meetings to promote discussion, answer questions, and gain the support of the school's stakeholders.

  - A. Plan community meeting-** Using available resources, the committee will create a power point to present to the attendees of the first community meeting. A guest speaker will be scheduled and other details of the meeting such as specific location (cafeteria, library, or gymnasium), child care during the meeting, and refreshments to be provided will be decided.

- B. Schedule the meeting-** The committee will check with the school's calendar for an optimal time that is available to meet with parents.
- IV. Changing the current policy-** The committee will agree on verbiage that will be added to the current school bullying policy. The wording will specifically address the issue of bullying, harassment, and violence against students who are, or are perceived to be LGBT. The committee will present the proposed change of the written policy to the leadership committee for approval.
- V. Changing the counseling curriculum-** Using resources that address the issue of acceptance and tolerance of the LGBT community, the committee will plan a lesson on diversity. The counselors will use the new lesson plan when educating students about diversity, tolerance, and acceptance. Some recommended books to include in the diversity lessons include: (1) *My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis, (2) *Sissy Duckling* by Harvey Fierstein, (3) *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Lesley Newman, and (4) *Daddy, Papa, and Me* by Lesley Newman.
- VI. Inviting the community-** The data collected in this research study revealed that the majority of adult school community members feel the school should begin meeting with small groups in order to gain the community's support. The committee will create a survey to send to all parents asking their feelings on various subjects, including the issue of LGBT bullying. Based on the responses received, the committee will specifically invite parents who indicated they would be supportive of, or interested in discussing such changes. The purpose of this is

to gather those who are already supportive and use them to help communicate to other parents and gain their support.

**VII. Time table:** Recruiting for the committee will take place the week that teachers come back from summer break. The committee will have its first meeting by the end of the second full week of school. Allowing a month for gathering resources, writing the amendment to the current policy, and planning a new lesson on diversity, the first community meeting will be held by the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> week of school. The amendment to the current policy should be made, upon approval at the first leadership meeting, by the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> week of school. The first revised diversity lesson should be in place by end of the first 9 week grading period.

## Appendix B

There were seven questions that guided the interviews.

- (a) How would you describe the culture of the school in relation to students who are, or are perceived to be LGBT?
- (b) How important do you perceive protecting LGBT students to be?
- (c) How would you describe the effectiveness of the anti-bullying policy at this school?
- (d) Would you be supportive of or opposed to programs in the school that would address this issue?
- (e) How might the school make changes to its current bullying policy to better protect LGBT students?
- (f) If you would be supportive of a change in the school's current policy, how difficult do you perceive it to be to get the community's support of the change?
- (g) In what ways might the school approach gaining the support of the school community?